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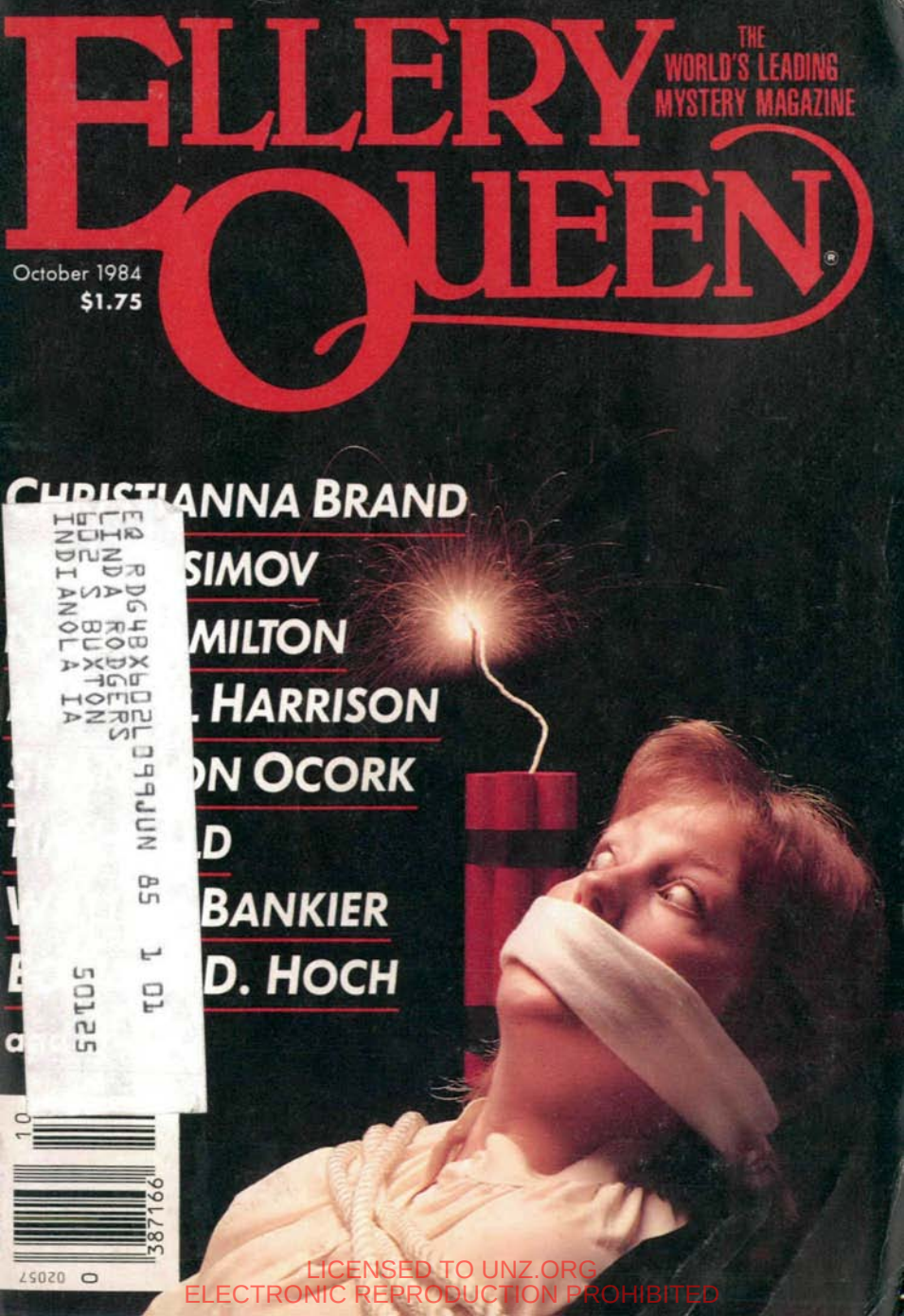

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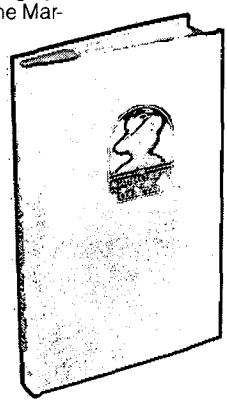

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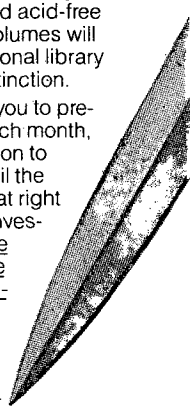

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A *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Why do you think this Foster fellow wants the plant?" Gloria asked Nick.

He shrugged. "Maybe there's a tape recorder hidden in the dirt, with evidence that Bates scared his wife to death, I don't know. I stopped questioning clients' motives long ago . . ."

THE THEFT OF THE DEAD HOUSEPLANT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Sometimes, when Gloria was upset or had something on her mind, she'd sit out in the back yard with her feet propped up, drawing sharp, skillful caricatures on a sketchpad. Nick Velvet had become aware of this during the seventeen years they'd lived together, and had mentioned it a few times, complimenting her on the sketches.

"You should show them to people," he suggested. "They're very good—even the ones of me."

But for Gloria they seemed to be a therapy of sorts, a calming influence in troubled times. They were something very private, and not to be shared. As Nick came to understand that, he no longer mentioned the drawings. Sometimes, in fact, his heart would sink when he saw her take down the sketchpad from the top shelf of the closet and head for the back yard alone.

It was in the lazy days of late summer, when every warm day might be the last, that he was surprised to see her with the pad. She hadn't had cause to do her caricatures in almost a year, and he wondered what had suddenly upset her. He opened two bottles of beer and wandered out to the back yard with them, pausing under

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the tree where she'd arranged herself with the pad and a sketch pencil.

"That's our neighbor, isn't it?" he asked, peering over her shoulder at the drawing of a bulbous man with an exaggerated walrus mustache.

"That's him," she agreed, accepting the beer.

Nick sat down beside her. "What's the trouble?"

Gloria stared off into space, and for a moment he thought she wouldn't answer. Then, without looking at him, she said, "I'm leaving you, Nicky."

"What?" He wasn't certain he'd heard the words. "What do you mean?"

"I've thought it all out. I'm nearly forty years old now. If I'm ever going to make a move, this is the time."

"I thought we were happy together," he said, feeling numb.

"We were. We were good together, but I just want a change."

He took a deep breath. "Is there someone else?"

"Yes, I guess so—but that's not the point. It would have happened even without Phil."

"Who is he?"

"You don't know him. He sells real estate. I met him a few months ago when you were away on one of your trips."

"Is that what bothers you?" Nick asked. "My trips?"

"No, I suppose not. It's your job, and if it happens to be a bit quirky, well—I've put up with it all these years."

"But stealing things isn't quite the same as selling real estate, is that it? Not quite as respectable?"

She closed her eyes and put down the sketchpad. "He wants to marry me, Nicky."

"I see."

"I'm almost forty and he wants to marry me. I guess I just don't want to let that chance slip by."

"What about him? Doesn't he have a wife?"

"He's divorced, and lonely."

Nick knew there was nothing he could say short of a proposal of marriage that might stop her. She'd made up her mind. She stayed the night, then in the morning she packed her bags, called a taxi, and was gone.

The days that followed were lonely without her. Nick puttered around the house, fixing things that had long needed fixing, hoping

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that the phone would ring with a job to take him far away. On the weekend, Gloria called to see how he was getting along and to say she'd be stopping by to pick up her golf clubs from the garage.

"Oh," Nick said, "so he plays golf."

She was silent on the other end of the phone, avoiding an argument.

Nick arranged to be away from the house when she came by. He was hurting too much to let himself be seen, and he was afraid of what he might do or say if Phil was along.

On Monday, he finally got an assignment that would take him away. Gloria called again that night and gave him a phone number where she could be reached. He jotted it down on the shopping-list pad she'd always kept next to the refrigerator. "I'll be away for a few days," he told her.

"A job, Nicky?"

"Yeah."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." He paused and then said, "I found your sketchpad in the closet. You forgot to take it with you."

"I don't need it. Keep it, or throw it away."

"Okay. Goodbye."

He hung up and walked over to the screen door, watching an evening drizzle that had begun to fall. The air had turned suddenly cooler and he knew that summer had ended.

Surprisingly, it was warmer in Toronto when he flew in the following morning. His contact was a man named Danny Foster, who'd arranged to meet him at Nathan Phillips Square, a vast plaza that stretched out in front of the modernistic City Hall buildings in the center of downtown. Seated on a stone bench before a glistening fountain and pool, Nick waited for the youngish man to outline his problem.

"You see what a good place this is to meet, Nick. Even if someone's got a directional mike aimed at us from across the street, the sound of the water will drown out our conversation."

"You're a careful man," Nick said, studying the cut of his summer suit and trying to decide if he carried a gun.

"I gotta be, in my business."

"What is your business?" Nick asked, though he already had a suspicion.

Danny Foster laughed—a quick bursting sound that was more

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like a cough than a genuine expression of humor. "Never mind that. Can you steal something for me?"

"You know my terms. Valueless objects only, no cash or jewelry or art work. Twenty-five thousand dollars on delivery." Remembering the present Canadian exchange rate, he added, "In American money."

"No problem. I want you to steal a dead houseplant."

"Sounds valueless enough," Nick admitted. "Where is it?"

"Here in Toronto, at a private residence."

"What's the catch? Why can't you hire an ordinary burglar?"

"The man is wealthy. His home is guarded with the latest in burglar alarms."

"What is he? A banker?"

"No, as a matter of fact he's a literary agent—one of the most successful in Canada. He entertains a great deal and I think that's your best chance—to crash one of his parties. See why I needed you instead of some two-bit second-story man?"

Nick nodded. "All right. Give me the address."

"It's all written down for you, along with a description of the plant and where you'll find it."

"Why would he leave a dead plant around, especially if he gives parties?"

"Believe me, he does. Here's a number where I can be reached. Okay?"

"I'll be in touch," Nick promised.

He left Foster and walked back across Queen Street to the big hotel where he was staying. Another job—an expired houseplant this time. No problem. But somehow the excitement had gone out of it for him. Since Gloria had left, it was all different.

The following morning, Nick rented a car and drove to the north side of the city where he found the address he wanted on a tree-shaded, winding street of large brick homes. As he drove by, a man in a business suit was just leaving the front door, going down the curving walk to a small station wagon that waited at the curb. On the door of the wagon was the name *Crown Catering Service.*

The literary agent's name was Rusher Bates, and his office was in downtown Toronto. He'd be at work now, and Nick decided on a brazen approach. If luck was with him, he might be able to pick up the plant and walk out with it this morning.

He waited five minutes after the station wagon pulled away, then

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parked in front of the house in the spot where it had been and walked up to the front door. When a stout woman in her forties answered his ring, he said, "Mrs. Bates? I'm Nicholas Smith. Crown Catering Service sent me over to check arrangements for your party."

The stout woman frowned. "I'm not Mrs. Bates, I'm the housekeeper. And there must be some mistake. The catering people were just here, not five minutes ago."

"Tall chap with wavy brown hair? I'm sorry I missed him. He's the one who asked me to stop by."

She eyed him with a trace of suspicion. "Funny he didn't mention you were coming."

"He must have forgotten. If I could step in for a minute, Miss—?"

"Rose Wilkinson. I've been housekeeper for the Bates family for five years, and I know these parties inside out." She'd finally relented and stepped aside, allowing him to enter the cool hallway of the home. Beyond it he could see a large living room that stretched to the rear of the house. "Though of course this one will be different, with Mrs. Bates gone."

Nick was busy scanning the living room for his target. "Is she away?"

"She died two months ago. Cardiac arrest. Such a pretty young woman, too. It was a shame." She bustled into the living room ahead of him. "Now tell me what you want and get out of here. I've got a million things to do before Friday."

Nick produced a little notebook from his pocket and took out a pen. "I just want to double-check the arrangements. Friday is the night. What time are we supposed to arrive with the food?"

Rose Wilkinson sighed with exasperation. "I've just been over all this with the other fellow, Mr. Sweeney."

"His report will no doubt be on my desk when I return to the office, but you'd be surprised how a follow-up report eliminates last-minute embarrassments."

She ran through the requirements for food and drink, bartenders and servers, while Nick scrupulously wrote down everything in his notebook. He'd moved farther into the living room and spotted the row of houseplants arranged at the rear windows to catch the morning light. Just as Danny Foster had said, one on the left side was indeed dead, its stalk of tiny blue flowers sagging lifelessly.

"That's a nice collection of plants there," he remarked casually, moving closer. "My wife tries to grow them, but they always seem to die on her. What are these?"

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"Let's see—this is a coleus, here we have an English ivy—and that's a Japanese rubber plant. Those two on the far end are a periwinkle and a geranium. But of course you know geraniums."

"Why don't you get rid of this dead one?"

"That poor buttercup plant? Mr. Bates said to keep it for now. I think he feels attached to it because it was one of his wife's favorites. I noticed the leaves were starting to droop the day we returned from the cemetery, but he said not to throw it out. Strange, isn't it?"

Nick studied the plant. It was certainly too large to slip under his coat, but perhaps he could get the housekeeper out of the room for a moment and then simply walk out with it. "I wonder, do you have a tape measure or a yardstick? I should get the dimensions here if we're going to set up a bar."

"The bar will be in the other room. We're having close to a hundred people, you know, and Mr. Bates feels there'd be too much of a jam having the bar here. This is the first party since Marilyn's death and he wants to make it a special one, with writers and editors from all over."

"Nevertheless, I really should measure the space we have to work in," Nick insisted. "Will you see if you can find me something?"

Rose went off reluctantly, disappearing through a swinging door to the kitchen area. Just as Nick was about to reach for the plant, the front door behind him opened. "Who in hell are you?" a gruff voice demanded.

Nick whirled around and confronted a tall man with a greying beard. He carried a leather briefcase in his left hand and a house key in his right. There was little doubt that he was Rusher Bates. "Mr. Bates! I'm Nicholas Smith from Crown Catering, just looking the place over and taking some notes for Friday's party."

At that moment Rose Wilkinson returned, carrying a yardstick. "Mr. Bates—I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

"You're not supposed to leave strangers alone in this house," Bates said. "I've told you that before. I have too many valuables around."

"But Mr. Smith is from the catering—"

"Don't let it happen again." Bates glared at Nick and left the room. Nick heard him climbing the stairs.

"I'm sorry if I got you into trouble," he said.

The housekeeper shrugged. "His bark is worse than his bite. He's still upset about Mrs. Bates's death, and who can blame him?"

Nick went through the motions of measuring the room. He could see there was no chance now of stealing the houseplant. He'd have

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to try again later. "What about entertainment?" he asked. "We can supply a very good male fortune teller. The ladies will love him."

"No, I don't think Mr. Bates—"

Then Nick had a brainstorm. "Do you think he'd like someone to do caricatures of the guests?"

She liked the idea. "I'll ask him." She started for the stairs, then remembered she was not to leave Nick alone and smiled apologetically.

"You ask him," Nick told her. "Meantime I'll see if our caricaturist is available and I'll call you tomorrow."

The flight to New York took only an hour, and as soon as he landed Nick telephoned the number Gloria had given him. She answered on the seventh ring, as he was about to hang up. "Hi," he said. "It's me. I just got back."

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Not so good. There's a problem. Could I see you?"

"I don't know, Nicky—"

"As a favor? For old times? I need your help."

They met at a seafood restaurant near the yacht club on Long Island Sound where they'd often dined after a day's sailing. It was a relaxing place, and this late in the sailing season it was almost empty. Nick arrived first, and when Gloria walked through the doorway he was struck by the healthy glow of her skin. She seemed renewed, rejuvenated, and his heart sank.

"I expected a man to answer when I called," he said—and immediately regretted it.

She played with her napkin. "He's out of town right now."

"I shouldn't have mentioned it." They ordered drinks from the waitress, who knew them, and then Nick continued, telling Gloria about the possible job in Toronto. "If they want a caricaturist for the party Friday night, would you do it?"

"I can't go up to Toronto," she said. "Phil will be home on Saturday."

"You'd be back by then. We could fly back early Saturday morning."

She shook her head. "You don't need me, Nicky. You're using this as an excuse. You must know a dozen other ways of stealing that houseplant."

"It's not that easy," he insisted. "Bates and the housekeeper both

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know me now. I can't crash the party as some author or publishing executive. I was hoping they'd want a male fortune teller but they didn't. But if you'd do caricatures they'd understand if I was there as a kind of observer for the catering service."

"Why not just break in during the night?"

"There's a burglar alarm. I saw the wires. It's one of those that rings at the police station if they're tampered with, or if the power fails."

"You could be in and out before they arrived."

"I'm getting too old for high-speed police chases. Besides, I don't know the city that well. Give me a break, Gloria. Two days, for all those years we spent together."

"Why do you think this Foster fellow wants the plant?"

Nick shrugged. "Maybe there's a tape recorder hidden in the dirt, with evidence that Bates scared his wife to death, I don't know. I stopped questioning clients' motives long ago."

They ordered their dinner and still Gloria would not give in. It wasn't until they were finishing dessert that she finally said, "All right, Nicky, I'll do it. Just this once. And I have to be back on Saturday. Don't ask me again. After this time, we're finished. All debts are paid."

As they parted in the parking lot, Nick said, "You're looking great, Gloria. When I first saw you, it made me jealous. —I wasn't going to mention it."

She smiled but said nothing as she slid behind the wheel of her car and turned on the ignition. With a little wave, she was gone.

They flew to Toronto on Thursday and Nick immediately phoned Rose Wilkinson. "We're in luck, Miss Wilkinson. I have a young woman who does fine caricatures, and she's available for tomorrow night. I'll come along and see that everything goes smoothly."

Her voice was frosty. "I spoke to Mr. Sweeney at Crown Catering. He says they don't handle entertainment and he never heard of you, Mr. Smith."

"Well, that's understandable," Nick said, without losing a beat. "Crown is a rapidly growing outfit. I actually work for a subsidiary company that supplies musical groups and other entertainment. We work out of a separate office."

"Then why did you have to measure?"

"We like to have a complete file on clients. If you called and said

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you wanted a trio for dancing, we'd know exactly how much space you had."

She finally decided to accept his story, possibly because she could think of no reason why it would be a lie. "You say you've got somebody who can do sketches of the guests?"

"That's right."

"How much does she charge?"

"She's very reasonable. Only ten dollars an hour."

"All right. Mr. Bates liked that idea. But I don't think we'll need your services."

"No charge. I'll just be observing her. She's new with us but comes highly recommended."

"You certainly do aim to please, Mr. Smith."

"What time will you want her?"

"She'd better be here by six. Some guests are coming from work."

Gloria had brought along an attractive artist's smock and a beret. The smock reached to mid-thigh and she wore it over black tights. Her long legs had always been shapely. "That should certainly distract every male in the room," he said approvingly.

They reached Rusher Bates's house a little before six. The white panel-truck from Crown Caterers was already in the driveway and two young men were unloading trays of food. Inside, a bar had been set up in the dining room. Rusher Bates, dressed casually in an open shirt and navy-blue blazer, was checking the liquor supply at the bar while Rose Wilkinson instructed a small group of uniformed maids. She broke off when she saw Nick and Gloria. "Nothing was said about a costume," she said, staring at Gloria's long legs.

"Let's see what Mr. Bates thinks," Nick suggested.

She glared at him, but called Bates over. The literary agent nodded approval. "The young lady is fine. What's your name, dear?"

"Gloria."

"Start by doing a quick sketch of me, will you?"

Gloria sat down, propping the pad on her crossed legs, and drew a few quick lines with her soft pencil. After a few moments' work, she tore off the sheet and handed him the result.

He laughed at the caricature. "You're good! Okay, Gloria—circulate among the guests for the first hour and we'll see how it goes."

The first guests were already arriving. While Gloria sketched, Nick circulated between the living room and the bar, casting a seemingly critical eye on the catering activities.

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"You work for Crown?" one guest finally asked him, an hour into the party. The house was growing blue with smoke, although Miss Wilkinson had turned on the air conditioning.

"That's right," Nick said.

"I'm Roy Tangier—I write paperbacks. I'm one of Rusher's clients. I didn't think I'd seen you at his other parties."

"This is my first time here," Nick acknowledged.

"You know something? He never changes this room. Wouldn't you think he'd at least throw out that dead plant?"

"Where?" Nick followed his glance. "Oh, I see what you mean. The others all seem healthy enough." As the party swirled around them, Nick asked casually, "I don't see Danny Foster here tonight. Isn't he usually at these parties?"

"You know Danny? He used to be. It's not likely Rusher would invite him now. The rumors are that he was a bit too friendly with Rusher's wife before she died."

"Oh?"

"Just rumors. Who's to say?"

Rusher Bates joined them at that moment. "Shouldn't you be keeping an eye on your people?" he asked Nick pointedly.

"I'll do that." Nick moved away, leaving the two of them together. Across the room, Gloria was bringing a gale of laughter from some guests with the latest of her caricatures.

The party started breaking up shortly after nine. Though Nick guessed it couldn't compare to a Manhattan literary gathering, he was impressed by the number of authors, publishers, and booksellers who had attended. As Bates saw them to the door and Gloria distracted the few remaining guests, Nick gathered up a tablecloth provided by the caterer from a cleared-off table nearby and draped it over the dead houseplant, tucking it under his arm and carrying it across the room and behind the bar, where the caterer's people were packing up the liquor and mixers. The bar itself was hinged to fold into a boxlike shape that could be easily transported. As Nick had guessed, the plant fit nicely inside it.

"What are you doing?" one of the bartenders asked.

Nick showed him a fifty-dollar bill. "Just carry it outside for me and this is yours. Okay?"

"Sure!"

Once outside, under cover of darkness, Nick paid the man and transferred the dead plant to his own rented car. Gloria joined him

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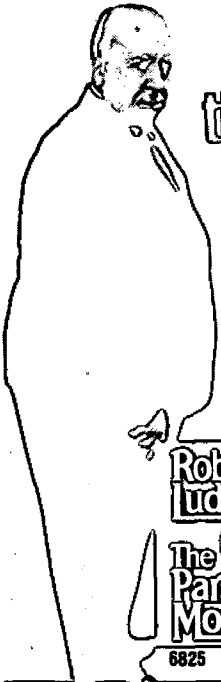

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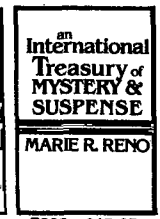

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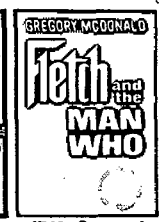

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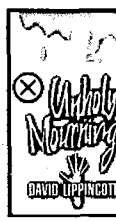

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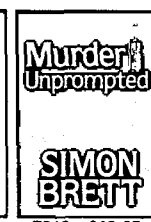

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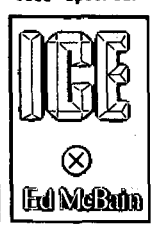

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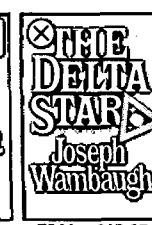

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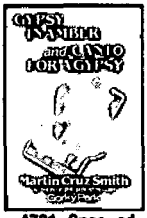
the most dastardly deeds.”

Alfred Hitchcock



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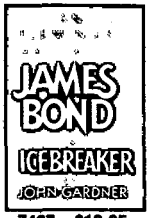

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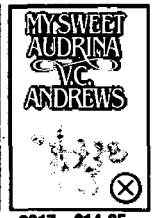

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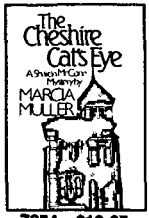

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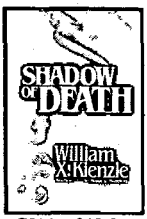

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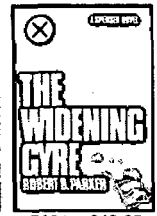

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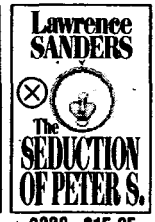

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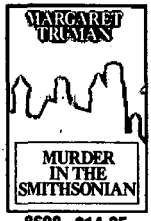

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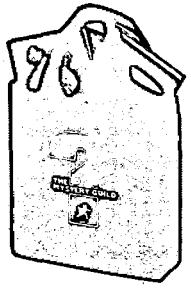

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with a smile. "Bates gave me an extra ten-dollar tip," she said. "Maybe I should start doing this for a living."

"Let's go. He'll notice that missing plant before long."

Back at Nick's hotel room, Gloria inspected the plant with a curious eye. "I'd love to know what makes this so valuable," she said, poking at the dirt with her nailfile. "What is it, anyway? I've never seen a houseplant like this."

"Miss Wilkinson called it a buttercup."

Gloria, who knew something about plants, continued prodding the soil. "It might be a member of that family, but it's no buttercup. It looks more like an aconite to me. They have these little blue sepals—the flowers would have been quite showy when it was alive."

"Stop poking at it. We haven't collected our fee yet."

Suddenly Gloria pulled the entire plant free of its dirt. "Look at this, Nicky! No wonder the poor thing died! Most of its roots have been cut away."

"Put it back! Foster will be here in an hour and I want to deliver what he asked for."

"Well, there's no tape recorder hidden here or anything else for that matter. It's only dirt."

"That's his problem."

Gloria replaced the dead stalk and patted the earth back around it. "I'd better get down to my own room. I don't want to see your Mr. Foster."

"You can spend the night here if you want," Nick said casually.

She sat down on the bed. "This evening was fun, Nicky, I won't deny it. But—"

"But Phil wants to marry you and I don't. Is that it?"

The telephone rang before she could answer. Nick picked it up and heard Danny Foster's voice on the other end. "Did you get it?"

"It's right here in my room, waiting for you."

"Great! I'm in the lobby. All right if I come up now?"

"Come ahead." He hung up and said to Gloria, "The client's on his way up. You might as well stay."

"No." She rose from the bed. "I'll see you later."

When Danny Foster saw the plant he smiled. "That's it! That's the one!"

"It's all yours."

Foster handed over a thick envelope of bills. "Have any trouble?"

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"Not much."

"This plant is going to bring me a fortune."

Nick hesitated and then said, "Blackmail can be a dangerous game, Danny."

"What? How'd you know?"

"You were having an affair with Marilyn Bates. Until what you said just now, I'd hoped you wanted that plant to take to the police, not to blackmail her killer."

"Then you know what it is?"

"I don't know one plant from another, but when someone told me it was an aconite I did know its other names—monkshood and wolfsbane. It has therapeutic uses in carefully controlled quantities, but it's also a deadly poison. Two to four grams of aconite root is a fatal dose, causing death within a half hour from circulatory paralysis and cardiac arrest. I was also told the cause of Marilyn Bates's death was cardiac arrest."

Danny Foster nodded. "And the plant died because the roots were cut away for the poison. I figure with that in my possession he'll pay up good. There are a hundred people to testify that the plant has been in his living room for the past year."

"Forget the blackmail," Nick advised. "Take it to the police."

"You've got your money, now let me get mine. I don't need you any more." Carrying the plant, Foster walked to the door and opened it.

The muffled shot caught Nick unaware. He saw Foster stagger back into the room and collapse, the flowerpot shattering as he fell.

Then Rose Wilkinson stepped through the doorway with a tiny pistol in her hand.

Nick raised his hands slowly above his head. "Of course it had to be you," he said. "Not Rusher Bates. He didn't kill his wife—you did."

"Very smart of you." She kicked at the plant on the floor. "If he'd gotten rid of this thing, I'd have been safe."

"That's what I should have realized. If Bates had poisoned his wife with it, he certainly would have disposed of it. No wonder you called it a buttercup plant. You were afraid I might know about aconite."

"I'll have to kill you, too, Mr. Smith—or whatever your name is. When I saw the plant was missing, I knew Foster was behind it. I got to his place just as he was leaving and followed him here."

"Why'd you kill Mrs. Bates?" Nick asked.

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"I hated her and—I don't hate him. That's about as simple as I can make it."

She was aiming the pistol for another shot when Danny Foster rolled over and grabbed her around the ankles. The bullet went into the ceiling as she toppled to the floor. Nick kicked the gun out of her hand and reached for the telephone.

The next morning, on the early flight to New York, Nick told Gloria, "Foster will pull through. She shouldn't have tried to kill anyone with a gun that small. Poison was her weapon."

"I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"Luckily, she broke down and confessed the whole thing, so they didn't need me as a witness."

"I'm glad, Nicky. I wouldn't have wanted to fly home alone."

"What about us?" Nick took her hand.

"We'll see," she said, looking out the window. But she didn't take her hand away.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE FREE

by ANITA SIEGEL

If it has no cash value Nick Velvet
(It's perfectly simple to tell 'v it)
Will steal what you please
For twenty-five gees,
Though sometimes he steals for the hell 'v it.

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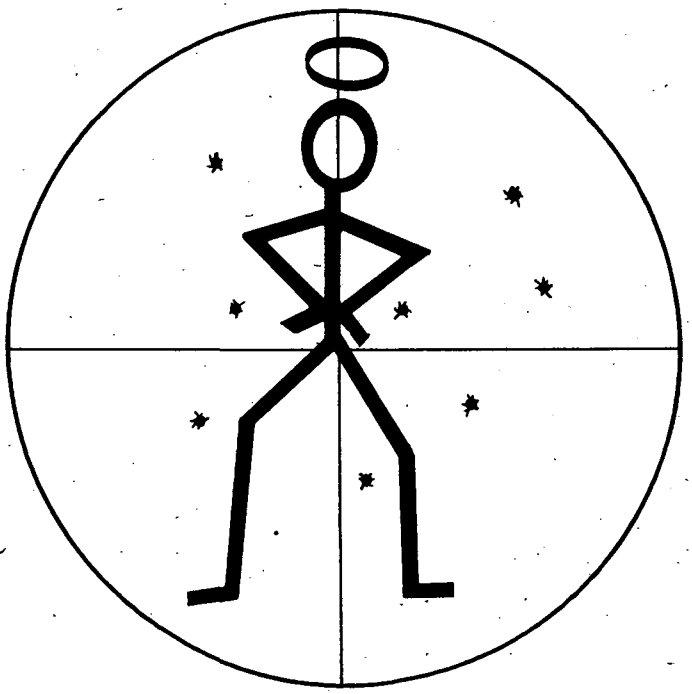

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A *NEW* Simon Bognor story by

TIM HEALD

"I do wish you'd try to be a little more charming," Monica said when the waiter had vanished back to the galley of the Bertolt Brecht. *"The war* is *over, you know."*

"That's what you think," said Simon.

Publishers Weekly *called Tim Heald's latest book,* Old Boy Networks: Who We Know and How We Use Them, *"delightful." We think you'll find his latest Simon Bognor adventure more of the same . . .*

SIMON BOGNOR AND THE MAN OVERBOARD

by TIM HEALD

Simon Bognor stared forlornly at his plate.

"Call this a grilled cheeseburger?" he said. "It looks more like a chilled greaseburger to me."

"You should have had the cold buffet," said Monica with asperity. "The wurst is delicious."

Bognor speared a radish from her plate with his fork. "I wanted something hot," he said.

"Then you should have had the boiled liver with dumplings."

The ship lurched slightly, causing Bognor to place a restraining hand on their bottle of Bulgarian riesling. "I did not want liver and dumplings. I had liver and dumplings yesterday."

"Kidney."

"What do you mean 'kidney?' "

"Kidney," said Monica, her voice freezing dangerously. "It was kidney and dumpling you ate yesterday."

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"Kidney, liver—what's the difference?"

"A lot."

"Not on this boat there isn't."

They were a day out of New York, sailing home to Blighty on a very small, rather cheap East German passenger and cargo ship en route for Tilbury, Antwerp, and Rostock. She was named the *Bertolt Brecht,* and although primitive in some respects she boasted a cat's cradle of antennae, discs, and other wires and radio devices which led Bognor to suppose she must be engaged in some form of espionage.

"He doesn't like the look of his cheeseburger, Kurt," said Monica, smiling at their waiter, newly emerged from the galley.

Kurt was aptly named: terse of manner, brief of speech. Bognor had immediately marked him down as a KGB nark, though Monica, rather taken with his Aryan looks, demurred.

Kurt removed the cheeseburger.

"Käse?" he inquired.

"What sort of käse?" Bognor wanted to know.

"Cow käse."

"Oh, all right," said Bognor wearily, "I'll have some cow käse and coffee."

"I do wish you'd try to be a little more charming," Monica told him when Kurt had vanished back to the galley. "The war *is* over, you know."

"That's what you think," said Bognor.

The ship's chief redeeming feature was the pianist. From time to time, he would take over from the beery Muzak or the ersatz rock group from Karl Marx Stadt and he would play Chopin and Lizst and the Russians. He was technically very good, but what made him special was the wistful melancholy with which he managed to invest everything he played, even waltzes and polkas. His name was Wolfgang.

Unlike most of the crew and entertainments' staff, Wolfgang had more than adequate English. His father, a diplomat, had spent three years in England when Wolfgang, now in his mid-thirties, was a teenager. During that time, Wolfgang had acquired a passion for steak-and-kidney pie and Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. Partly because the Bognors appeared to be the only people on board who liked listening to his music, partly because they were keen on steak-and-kidney, and also because Bognor, too, was an admirer of Jimmy Greaves, he had struck up an acquaintanceship, accepting with

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pleasure their offers of Leipzig beer and the stubby little Havanas Bognor had discovered on sale in the "American" bar.

By the third day, Wolfgang and the Bognors were really quite friendly. It was more usual than not for the three of them to drink together for a while after one of his recitals and no surprise, therefore, on evening three of the voyage, to find Simon and Wolfgang discussing the 1966 World Cup Final over a couple of glasses of German brandy. Bognor, who had marginally overindulged in the brandy (fiery but potable), was relaxed and on the verge of becoming boring. Wolfgang, however, seemed fidgety and ill-at-ease. Monica, who despised football, had retired to bed with a copy of *The Poseidon Adventure* and a nightcap of duty-free Scotch.

Bognor was just describing the West German goal which tied the game at two all when Wolfgang grabbed hold of his shoulder so fiercely that he almost cried out.

"Please," said Wolfgang, "I must talk with you."

Bognor looked blank. "You *are* talking with me," he said.

Wolfgang grimaced. "Talk," he said. "Talk. I must be serious with you. That is not possible here." He indicated the room, full, mainly, of ponderous Germans in ill-fitting mass-produced clothing. "On deck," he said. "On deck we may talk together."

"But it's wet outside. It's been raining since tea-time. What do you want to talk about?"

"I cannot tell you here. Since the weather is inclement, it will be possible to be quite private outside. I have something I need to say very badly."

Bognor had no great wish to venture out on deck in mid-Atlantic drizzle, but the pianist was insistent. Together they moved out of the Grand Lounge, past the half dozen stiffly-locked dancing couples, across the foyer, and onto the boat deck.

It was quite foggy now and much too damp for comfort. The two men turned up their jacket collars and trudged to the side. Bognor gazed starboard across the doldrum flat water. It was impossible to gaze very far because of the fog and it was disconcerting to think of the mile upon mile of flat, salt water stretching on behind the moist grey curtain.

"Big, the Atlantic," he said fatuously, and turned to see if Wolfgang agreed.

To his surprise, the pianist had taken off his jacket and flung it to the deck. He was now removing his shoes. "What *are* you doing?" asked Bognor, quite alarmed, and even more so when his companion

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straightened up. He was looking extraordinarily tense and, as he moved as close as possible to Bognor, there was a gleam in his eye which Bognor could only describe as dangerous.

"Tell Marlene I love her," he whispered dramatically. Saying which, he kissed Bognor on both cheeks, turned round, and jumped over the side.

He executed this maneuver so rapidly that Bognor, who was not expecting it and was in any case fairly fuddled from brandy, did nothing at all but simply stare at the water. He was very shocked. After this brief second of inertia, however, he remembered what to do.

"Man overboard! Man overboard!" he shouted as loudly as he knew how. There was no sign of Wolfgang, but still Bognor threw a nearby life-jacket into the sea and said a silent prayer.

The next few minutes in Bognor's life were confusing, confused, and, at the time and in retrospect, distressing. After throwing the life-jacket and seeing no sign of Wolfgang, alive or dead, he charged back into the Grand Lounge, shouting his incantatory "Man overboard! Man overboard!" At first the assembled passengers seemed to think this was the beginnings of some unusual English dance along the lines of the Sir Roger de Coverley or the Hokey Cokey; but eventually truth dawned. When it did, there was a great scurrying hither and yon.

Several men hurried outside and peered aimlessly over the side; those sitting in the lounge talked breathlessly but pointlessly to their neighbors; and a uniformed officer took Bognor by the arm and conducted him swiftly to the bridge.

"The captain must turn back," said Bognor. "He's probably still out there. Floating. I threw a life-jacket."

His escort said nothing until they reached the bridge, where, evidently, news of the tragedy had preceded them. There was much ringing down of signals, staccato commands, controlled flurry. Two officers stood hard by the window, while, outside, a searchlight beam scoured the sea, moving slowly from left to right and back. Bognor remembered the immensity of the ocean and felt glum.

The older of the two watchers, a stocky greybeard wearing more gold braid than was good for him, put down his glasses and looked somberly at Bognor before saying, "You saw a man fall overboard."

"Well, actually he jumped."

The captain raised his left eyebrow in a gesture Bognor guessed

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he practiced in front of a mirror and which was intended to convey disbelief.

"Why did you not prevent him?"

"It was much too sudden. I mean, one minute he was there and the next he was over the side. Here one minute, gone the next, if you see what I mean." Bognor was uneasily aware that he was not making a very good impression. The captain turned back to scrutinize the sea.

"Did you know this man?" he asked, not pausing in his search.

"Yes. —I mean, not well. We'd only recently met. He was the ship's pianist. You know—Wolfgang."

This did have some effect. The unflappable sailor let out some fearful German oath, the meaning of which Bognor was unable to discern, and said something equally incomprehensible to an underling. The underling immediately disappeared at the double. The captain returned his attention to Bognor.

"This is a serious business," he said flatly.

Bognor was in no mood to cap platitudes. Besides, he judged that any response, however polite, might be misconstrued.

"There are many things," continued the captain, "that I am not understanding. For now it is most important to see if we are able to find someone in the water. Tomorrow we shall have to have a little talk." He nodded his head and made a stiff little bow. Bognor felt dismissed.

Downstairs in the cabin, Mrs. Bognor lay in the bottom bunk and put down her book.

"You look a bit grisly," she said. "I don't think that ship brandy is an awfully good idea. And is it my imagination, or have they turned the ship around? We seem to be going back towards America."

"Something rather terrible has happened," said Bognor, passing a hand over his sweating brow and leaning hard against the washbasin.

"We've hit an iceberg," said Monica. "The captain's gone mad. There's been a hijack and we're going to Havana."

"It's not funny." Bognor poured himself a generous Scotch and topped up with water from the metal jug above the basin. "It's Wolfgang. He jumped overboard."

"Good grief!" Monica was gratifyingly startled. Despite the distressing circumstances, Bognor was always pleased to get that sort

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of reaction from his wife. She was usually in such control of everything, himself included.

He explained the details.

"I must say," he said at the end, "I didn't at all care for the captain's attitude. Very German, if you ask me. If we were in Germany, I think he'd have handed me over to the S.S. for questioning."

"They're not called that any more."

"Well, whatever they *are* called now. He was really quite offensive. As good as suggested I'd pushed him in."

Monica frowned. "Did they seem to think they'd find him?"

"God knows," Simon said. "Even if he's still afloat, it's like needles and haystacks. There's a lot of water and not much of Wolfgang."

"Poor Wolfgang."

"Yes."

They were silent for a while, just listening to the throb of the ship's engines, that ever-present background noise which after early irritation they had both come to find oddly comforting.

"When you think about it," said Monica, "it doesn't look very good."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you were the only witness. No one can prove you didn't push him in."

"Oh, come on." Bognor laughed a hollow little laugh which faded into the next anxious sentence: "Why on earth should I push him in? And he'd hardly take off his shoes and jacket first."

"That puzzles me." Monica got out of the bunk and walked to the porthole. Not a long walk since there was scarcely room to swing a mouse, let alone a cat. "Why should he take off his shoes and jacket?"

"So he could swim more easily." Bognor said this as if it was a piece of common sense which any fool could have seen. Only when he had said it did he realize its implications. Monica already had.

"We're right in the middle of the Atlantic. There's nowhere to swim to. Or is there? No islands, are there?"

"Iceland . . . Newfoundland . . . Bermuda . . . The Canaries." Bognor tried to visualize that particular page in the atlas. "No—no islands within hundreds of miles," he said. "I suppose he could have been going for a passing boat."

"Did you see a passing boat?"

Bognor had to confess that he had seen no passing boat.

"Perhaps," said Monica a little later, brushing her teeth noisily,

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"It was just some strange reflex. After all, his behavior was pretty eccentric. Kissing you on both cheeks and saying 'Marlene, I love you.' "

"No," protested Bognor, " 'Tell Marlene I love her.' "

"Even so," said Monica, "he was behaving in a very unhinged fashion. We shouldn't inquire too closely into the logic of his actions. He'd obviously had too much and this was the easiest way out."

"Too much of what?"

"Oh." Monica sighed. "Too much of everything, I should imagine. Playing the piano on an East German cruise ship isn't exactly my idea of heaven."

Bognor started to undress. "It's very upsetting," he said.

Next morning after a hearty breakfast—the East Germans seemed to eat as hearty a breakfast as the English, and with garlic to boot—Bognor was summoned once more. This time it was not the captain but a sinister figure in a civilian suit and lightly tinted glasses. Bognor immediately marked him down as Kurt's superior officer.

"I am afraid we were unable to find your friend Herr Plotz," said Kurt's boss, who did not introduce himself.

Bognor had not known that Wolfgang was called Plotz. It was a depressingly prosaic name.

"I'm sorry," said Bognor.

"Ja." The man had a folder open on the table in front of him and he very deliberately took a fountain pen from his inside pocket, unscrewed the top, and began to write. "Your name is Bognor. Simon. And you are an employee of the British Board of Trade."

"Yes," said Bognor. It was in his passport. They had confiscated all passports on embarkation. Bognor hadn't liked that. It was the property of Her Majesty's Government and said so on the inside cover.

"You are involved in Special Investigations."

That was not in his passport. It was, however, true.

"Yes," he said.

"Can you tell me please what that means?"

"What's all this got to do with Mr. Plotz?"

Tinted glasses smiled menacingly. "That, Mr. Bognor, is what we are hoping to discover."

Bognor said nothing.

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"I do hope," said his interrogator, "that you are not going to be obstructive."

"Certainly not," said Bognor.

"Because you see, Mr. Bognor, we have only your word for what happened. Several witnesses saw you leave the lounge with Herr Plotz. A few minutes later you returned alone, saying that Herr Plotz had jumped overboard."

"Yes."

Tinted glasses leaned across the desk. "Jumped, Mr. Bognor? Jumped. Did he jump or was he pushed?"

"Are you accusing me of pushing him overboard?"

"Not yet, but you will agree that the circumstances are, shall we say, interesting."

"Not particularly."

"What was it you said about Special Investigations?"

Bognor was not to be trapped so easily. "Nothing," he said. "I said nothing about Special Investigations."

"Precisely." The German's voice had an edge of triumph. "Why not? I will tell you why not. Because your special investigations are carried out under conditions of secrecy. You are what is called in the movies 'a secret agent.' Why are you on board this vessel, Mr. Bognor? Eh? Why?"

"Why did the chicken cross the road?"

This did not go down very well. Tinted glasses stood up and waved the folder at Bognor. "Do not make games with me! This is a very serious matter! A citizen of the German Democratic Republic has been murdered on the high seas. You are a prime suspect. You are the only suspect. You are in a very serious position."

"I merely meant," explained Bognor when the rage had subsided, "that I was on the vessel in order to cross the Atlantic. I've been in America and I thought I'd treat myself to a little holiday. My wife and I needed one."

"Holiday? Holiday? You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

"Huh." Tinted glasses was obviously not going to believe anything he said, so Bognor decided to try asking him a question. "Why do you imagine I would want to push him over the side?"

"That is what I am here to find out."

"Why don't you just accept that he committed suicide?"

There was no answer to this. The notion was obviously too preposterous to merit any . . .

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Eventually Simon was allowed to return to his cabin and the voyage returned to something approaching normalcy. The Bognors declined to compete in the fancy-dress competition or to play bingo, but they ate and drank and huddled in deck chairs under vivid tartan rugs and felt queasy though not quite sick. There were no more interrogations, but the voyage had been blighted by Wolfgang's disappearance and both Bognors had the feeling that their every move was watched and noted by Kurt and his colleagues. Bognor only saw tinted glasses once, on the stairway to the baggage room in the bowels of the ship. Tinted glasses did not acknowledge his greeting.

They were both quite glad, therefore, when the *Bertolt Brecht* rounded Land's End and began her final leg up the English Channel. There was a farewell dinner that evening with goose and red cabbage and a Baked Alaska which was borne in, flaming, by the waiters in number-one kit. Afterwards, Simon and Monica sat in the American bar, drank German brandy, and reflected that despite everything England wasn't such a bad place and it would be good to get home and see Bognor's boss, Parkinson. Bognor had second thoughts about this the moment he'd said it and they drank another German brandy and decided that whatever the merits of home, there was a lot to be said for a life on the ocean wave but next time they would go on the *QE2* or that Polish boat, the *Stefan Batory,* which sailed out of Montreal. Then they ordered a final German brandy and went to bed.

They were woken from alcohol-assisted slumber a few hours later at, according to Bognor's admittedly unreliable wristwatch, 2:33 in the morning. Someone was in the room. There was no problem gaining entry, since the doors didn't lock—something to do with communism.

The interloper was obviously not intent on theft since he was trying to wake them up rather than the reverse, but at the same time he was apparently concerned not to rouse anybody else. Though shaking Bognor's shoulder, he also kept saying "Shh." Bognor disengaged himself, rolled over, and turned on the light.

It was Wolfgang Plotz.

Both Simon and Monica were inclined to scream, but Herr Plotz's frenzied and insistent hushing noises plus the silencing effect of shock meant that they made no sound at all. They simply stared. Bognor bit his lip to make sure he was awake. Then whispered:

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"Wolfgang?"

"Jawohl," said Herr Plotz.

"But, Wolfgang," said Monica, "you're supposed to be dead. Simon said you dived overboard in mid-Atlantic."

"I am a very strong swimmer," he whispered.

"But you're not trying to tell me that you've swum halfway across the Atlantic." Bognor was incredulous.

Wolfgang laughed almost silently. Then he explained in a rapid, urgent whisper that he had tied a rope to a rail at the stern. After diving in, he had managed to grasp hold of this and haul himself back on board. Ever since, he had been stowed away in one of the lifeboats, where he had earlier secreted some iron rations.

"But why?" the Bognors both wanted to know.

Wolfgang seemed surprised that they had bothered to ask. To him it was quite obvious.

"I can only escape if I am dead," he explained patiently. "And Marlene and my family—there will be no what you call reprisals. If I defect, they would be locked up. If I kill myself, nothing happens."

Evidently all crew members were watched like hawks by tinted glasses, Kurt and company whenever they were near Western ports. Defection was almost impossible and, as he said, if anyone did defect, the repercussions for their loved ones at home were dire.

"Marlene is your girl friend?" asked Monica.

Wolfgang nodded.

"You look pretty dead anyway," said Bognor. He got out of bed and poured the pianist a slug of duty-free, which he swallowed avidly. He did indeed look very thin and pale, his cadaverous appearance worsened by the stubble on chin and cheeks.

"I must not stay too long. It's dangerous."

"Why did you come?" asked Bognor. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm delighted to find you still alive, but, well—"

Wolfgang pointed to a rucksack at his feet.

"I cannot swim to shore with that," he said. "Would you be very kind and bring it with you?"

Bognor started to prevaricate. After all, he was already under suspicion of murdering Wolfgang. If he were found smuggling his personal effects into Britain things might get out of hand. It certainly wouldn't look good.

"Yes, of course we will," said Monica briskly. "Absolutely not a problem."

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Bognor gave her one of his famous withering glances and smiled at Wolfgang. "How do you collect? And how do you get ashore?"

"I'll find you," said Wolfgang confidently. "And I'll swim to Dover when we stop to pick up the pilot. We're only a mile off shore then and everyone is watching the pilot come aboard. I go from the other side and no one will see. My friends will be ready."

"I hope you're right."

"Thanks," said Wolfgang, and was gone.

Next day at dusk they hove to about a mile from the white cliffs, gleaming in the last of the sun, with the castle lit by the first floodlights of evening. Very romantic. Most of the passengers leaned over the side to watch the Trinity House launch draw alongside. The pilot clambered up the side of the *Bertolt Brecht* as his launch spun away. It left a white wash behind as it raced to the next in line, a bulky container ship sailing under the Liberian flag. Mr. and Mrs. Bognor did not observe this scene, for they were on the other side, scanning the water for a glimpse of the swimming pianist.

They did not have to wait very long. Just as the pilot was ascending, Wolfgang Plotz hit the surface of the English Channel, breaking the water cleanly and surfacing a few seconds later, just as the ship itself began to maneuver back on course for the North Foreland and the Port of London beyond.

He really was a strong swimmer. No problem indeed. For a time he seemed to tread water, but then as the *Bertolt Brecht* pulled away he started for the shore, arms sliding past his ears like clockwork, feet beating a crisp tattoo behind him. As they watched, they saw a small motor launch chug through the harbor entrance and head out to sea.

"Wolfgang's friends?" asked Bognor.

"Guess so," said his wife, who had picked up a number of transatlantic idioms on their stay in North America.

And although they were almost out of sight when it happened, it did seem to both of them that before very long the launch did make some rendezvous, that there was a brief pause before it turned about and headed home to Dover.

A fellow passenger joined them.

"You see something?" he inquired.

"Some sort of fish," said Monica with great presence of mind.

"We think it might be a porpoise," said Bognor.

And the three of them stared southwest into the evening grey . . .

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Next morning Bognor was irritated though unsurprised to receive a summons from tinted glasses.

"We are not at all happy with your explanations," he said grimly, "and we have considered bringing charges against you. But in order to further understandings between our two countries we have complied with official requests from London and have agreed to hand you over to them in order to stand trial in your home country."

"Stand trial?"

"Naturally. For the murder of Wolfgang Plotz. We accept that if you are found guilty in a German Democratic Republic Court many people will believe we are simply making propaganda. But the world will respect British justice. When you are hanged at Tyburn they will see that it is correct. A jolly good show and all that rot." Tinted glasses laughed. "In Germany," he added conversationally, "you would be shot."

"Quite." Bognor's self-assurance stemmed from the knowledge he possessed and tinted glasses did not. Nevertheless, it was a little galling to be escorted by uniformed crew members and formally handed over to a couple of plainclothes policemen waiting patiently in the drizzle on the Tilbury quayside. He was only reassured by the presence of his boss, Parkinson. Parkinson was obviously not amused at being summoned thus from his Sunday-morning sleep-in.

"I trust, Bognor, that you have a satisfactory explanation," he said when the Germans were out of earshot. "I don't hold with pushing pianists into the mid-Atlantic. Nor will the courts."

"Do you think," asked Bognor amiably, "that they'd convict without a corpse?"

"Indubitably," said his superior. "It's been done before."

"But more *likely* if they can produce a body?"

"Naturally." Parkinson looked fatigued.

"Well, I," exclaimed Bognor, "am about to fly in the face of criminal history. Within a very few days I expect to show you the body of Wolfgang Plotz."

Parkinson looked even more fatigued.

"And," continued Bognor, "the body of Wolfgang Plotz will, I confidently predict, establish my innocence beyond all reasonable doubt."

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The child was squatting, looking at the man.

"You like trucks, boy?"

The boy smiled. In his tiny round fist he held the metal dump-truck he carried with him every day. "I drive," the boy said.

Peggy Wurtz Fisher is a former journalist, married, and living with her family in New England. This, her first published fiction, is grim reading, we warn you, but it is an unusually fine and promising "first," a virtuosic blending of character, place, story, and suspense . . .

THE PICKUP

by PEGGY WURTZ FISHER

One hour before daylight on a morning in September, a man strangled his two-year-old son and put him in a laundry sack. The boy gurgled once when the man's hands tightened on his throat. The sack was collected four hours later along with dozens like it by Parker Laundry Service.

The next day, when the man's ex-wife arrived at the apartment to pick up their son, she found the door locked and no one at home. She thought the man had fled with the child—he had threatened to often enough.

He hadn't, of course. The child was out of her reach forever—and soon the man would be, too. The third car he checked had keys in the ignition and, hidden by an early-morning haze, he drove out of the city. He headed northwest, toward the woods. He stopped at the first rest area along the highway and took his soiled green knapsack from the back seat. Hunching his shoulders, he walked into a thicket some distance from the parking lot. He knelt and dumped the contents of the sack onto the soft peat. Kenneth's yellow blanket was there—also his rubber bath-toy, a boat. The man squeezed the rubber

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toy, frowning. Water leaked from the boat, dripping to the ground. He ate a few slices of bread which had been stuffed into the sack, all the while holding the rubber boat in one hand. He squeezed and squeezed until no more water came out. Suddenly, his shoulders slumped. His head dropped between his knees and he made a soft gulping sound. No one was near enough to hear.

Back in the car, he sped many miles along the macadam highway until he came to farmland. The woods were beyond. He saw a dirt road ahead next to an abandoned apple orchard. He swerved the car off the highway and down the dirt road. It was pebbly and filled with ruts. It wound around behind the orchard, now overgrown with alder and beech, and down toward a river. The man drove rapidly, sending up a trail of dust and scattering stones. Rubbish lined one side of the packed dirt—bedsprings, broken window glass, and bald rubber tires. A house trailer sat on a knoll near the river. The man stopped the car.

A small boy was playing in the dirt, pushing a dented metal dumptruck around and around. A thin young woman with straw-colored hair and sharp features opened the door of the trailer. She looked at the man as he got out of the car, then went and stood next to her son. "What do you want?"

The man leaned against the car. There was dust in his hair and in his teeth. "I need a drink of water." He stood still.

"Get out of here or I'll call the police," she said, hands on bony hips.

"Hey, take it easy. My engine's overheated." He nodded at the smoking car. "And I got to have some water." He watched the small boy step in front of the woman. The child held onto the truck as he stared at the man. His hair curled in tendrils as yellow as Kenneth's blanket.

"Daddee?"

"No," the woman said. She reached for her throat, a protective gesture.

"Listen, I need work," the man said. "You got any?"

"I've got no money," she said. "You could try up to the mill. They're hirin'."

"No," he said. "Not the mill. Not right now. Hey, I really gotta have a drink." He started toward the trailer.

"All right. All right. You can have a drink." The child followed her to the trailer and climbed unsteadily up the steps behind her.

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The screen door slammed in the man's face. He had to open it to go in. "Here." She set a green plastic cup of water on the formica table.

He drank the water, eyeing the boy, who continued to stare at him. "I see your steps're all rotted out. The kid'll fall through someday. You let me stay a few days'n I'll patch 'em up. Got any scrap wood out there?" He motioned toward a small stand of pines that stood between the trailer and the river. At the edge of the trees, the garbage spread fifty feet in either direction.

"Used to be a dump here," she said. "There's some wood in that mess." She looked at the small boy. "Full of nails, though. Lots of rats in there." She laughed a high-pitched laugh that made the man straighten up and look at her again.

She was not a pretty woman, although she might have had her day. Her eyes were worn and her light hair was brittle and unevenly cut. Her face was pinched and unyielding until she smiled. It was a magical smile, lopsided and fierce.

He worked two days on the steps; it was easy work but he drew the labor out to give him time. The first night he stayed there, the woman put on the television and there was a news story about Kenneth's body being found in the laundry sack. The woman glanced at the newscaster and back to the hotdogs she was frying without changing expression. When it was reported that Kenneth's father had disappeared and was a prime suspect, she remained staring at the greasy frypan, flipping the hotdogs until they were blackened. He ate silently. As he squeezed the hotdog roll and bit into the meat, ketchup, thin as blood, dribbled onto his plate. The boy stared at it.

"You gonna drop that on the floor or somethin'?" The woman had turned from the stove and put another frankfurter on his plate. She reached over to the highchair and cut up half of one for her son. The little boy picked up each piece, examined it carefully as if he were looking for flaws, and then popped it into his mouth.

The man watched her with the boy. She used the same measured movements serving him as she used serving the man; deliberate and restrained. Her strange smiles came at odd moments, often for no apparent reason. The boy, on the other hand, was all motion, but he could be exceptionally controlled at times, like his mother. He sat quietly in the highchair, but once let loose he ran zigzag until he exhausted himself. Kenneth had done that until the man had not been able to stand it. Back and forth. Back and forth, round and round. Once Kenneth had dragged a metal coat hanger across the apartment floor, running in circles. Scratch, scratch, scrape, scrape.

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The sound made the man's flesh turn cold. He had snatched the hanger and whipped Kenneth until he had screamed, a shrill scream that had disturbed the neighbors in the apartment building. It had been a long time before his wife had left the child alone with him after that.

When the steps were patched, he asked if she wanted him to take a look at the old pickup parked behind the trailer. She had told him it was broken, that her girlfriend gave her a ride to the store in the village once a week. The pickup, she had said, belonged to the boy's father, who left before his son was born. Now the boy and his mother collected state aid and lived alone in the trailer.

"How come he took off on you like that?" The man was using a slice of bread to push beans onto his fork. The boy was eating beans with his fingers, examining each one before he put it into his mouth. Man and boy looked up on occasion, but not at each other.

She shrugged. "I thought he'd come back for the pickup even though it was broke. It's been sittin' there for two years now on that dirt pile out back. Fussed over that damn pickup more than he ever fussed over me, that's for sure." She gave him one of those wild, cockeyed smiles.

"You look real pretty when you smile like that," he said. He looked at the boy, who stared back at him. "I don't know why he'd run out on a kid like that. Hey. That reminds me. I've got something for the kid." He went into the back room where he slept and got his pack.

"His name's Carlton," she said, spooning more baked beans onto the man's plate.

"For Carlton," he said, handing the boy Kenneth's rubber boat. The boy held the boat a moment and squeezed. There was a slight squeak. The child smiled. He squeezed again. Another squeak. A single drop of water landed on the highchair tray. The boy handed the boat back to the man. "No want," he said to his mother. "No want."

She sighed deeply and removed the child's soiled bib. She lifted the tray and he scrambled down from the highchair. "He doesn't trust men," she said. "Thinks they're all like his daddy, I guess." She started scraping the dishes.

The pickup was well rusted, some of the wiring was rotted, and the exhaust pipe was hanging down. But the engine was in good shape. He figured he would tune the engine, then he would repair the wiring and secure the exhaust pipe. In a week he could have it fixed and be on his way. But he would have to dispose of the stolen

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car pretty soon. She wanted him to take her to town in it. He couldn't risk that. He told her that the engine had been giving him trouble and he wanted to work on it.

He parked the car on the edge of the knoll next to the truck and walked down toward the riverbank. He spent the day lying on the riverbank, his head on Kenneth's yellow blanket. Smoking cigarettes one after another, he watched the water carry stumps and bare branches down the river. Twigs poked up from the water like skeletal hands. At the end of the day, he walked back to the trailer. He told her that the car needed new points and plugs, that he would have to wait until he fixed the truck and went to town. She asked no questions, just smiled that twisted smile.

Every day the boy followed him as he rummaged through the old dump. At first he thought the boy was simply seeking company, then he saw that he was rummaging, also. The dump was where the child got his toys. Grimly, he would push his fat little body over old window frames and rotting car seats, looking around him all the while. The third day that the man stayed at the trailer, the boy came in during lunch with a tarnished red pail and shovel.

"Find it," he told his mother. He put it next to his highchair and while he chewed on bits of bologna, he glanced down at the battered pail and shovel. He saw the man look at his new toys. "Find it," he said coldly.

It took a week to get into the woman's bed. Until then, she never once showed any interest in having the man sleep with her. At night, they sat around the formica table and looked at the television until the child wore himself out pushing his truck around. Then she took the child to her room, where he slept on one side of her double bed. When the eleven o'clock news came on, she turned the television off. She used the bathroom and went to her room without glancing at him. He made instant coffee and turned the television back on. Then he went to his room, where he lay on an old sofa and looked at the water stains on the ceiling. He thought of Kenneth's mother, who would never get her son back.

One night, while the man watched television, the woman bathed the boy. Then she bathed. The man was still at the formica table when she came into the kitchen. She was naked, her wispy hair wet and combed. Silently she took his hand and led him to the room where he slept. She closed the door and reached for his belt. He undressed quickly and pulled her down on the sofa where they made

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a kind of savage love without words. When they were through, she reached for the light, flicked it on, and left.

The next day when he was under the truck, lying flat on his back wrapping wire around the exhaust pipe, he saw the boy. The child was squatting, looking at the man.

"You like trucks, boy?"

The boy smiled. In his tiny round fist he held the metal dumptruck he carried with him every day. "I drive," the boy said.

"Yep," said the man, sliding his legs out next to the back wheel, his head under the rear fender. "Say, Carlton, why don't you drive out there in the dirt?"

The child remained crouched, staring at the man, his eyes the innocent and unknowing eyes of a baby. When the man looked his way, the boy repeated, "I drive."

"Hey, go play in the dirt pile. Or how about in the middle of the highway?" The man laughed and his voice became harsh. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

The boy remained.

"Okay, okay, you drive." The man slid out from beneath the truck. He opened the door of the cab and swung the boy roughly into the driver's seat. "Drive the damn thing, okay?"

The child knelt at the wheel. He studied it, running his small hands over it as if he were feeling for flaws. The man checked the gears and pulled up the handbrake.

He slid back under the truck as the woman came from the trailer. She walked through the dust wearing rubber beach sandals. "Look who's drivin'." She gave the boy her wild and fierce smile.

"I drive," said the boy, standing on the driver's seat and pounding the horn with his fist.

She reached through the window and patted his light hair. "You look just like your daddy in there, you know that?"

"Daddee!" shrieked the boy, swinging the wheel to the left and then jerking it back to the right.

The woman knelt down and smiled at the man under the truck. He rolled his head back to look at her upside down. "Did your boyfriend drag this exhaust pipe along the road?" He smiled. "Almost got it fixed enough to take to town. Don't suppose this heap is registered?"

"Daddee!" The screaming child, bouncing furiously on the driver's seat, released the brake.

"Get the damned kid out of—" the man started to say.

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The last word he ever heard came a second later. "Daddee!" It pierced the air as the truck rolled over him. The woman jumped back. She tugged at the driver's door as she ran along the incline with the truck.

She got in and pushed her son to the passenger's seat. Grabbing wildly, she yanked up the handbrake. Leaping from the cab, she ran behind the truck. The man was motionless; his eyes bulged and his mouth was open. His body made liquid sounds. He lay crumpled, like a sack of dirty clothes.

The woman bent over him. Angry tears formed in her eyes. "Damn you, Carlton," she said. She walked back to the front of the truck. "Damn you," she said again.

"I drive," said the boy, sitting again in the driver's seat. He turned to his mother and smiled. "I drive."

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a *NEW* Sam Ohara story by

NAN HAMILTON

At the Championship Koi Show, Uncle noted with approval that the tanks were properly aerated and that the koi had already been segregated as to size. A crowd of fascinated spectators were exclaiming at the beautiful colors of the fish: blue, red, orange, silver, white touched with pink, gold, and inky black. Occasionally a fish, disturbed by the unaccustomed noise, would jump high out of the water, causing new excitement . . .

UNCLE USHIRO'S FISH STORY

by NAN HAMILTON

When Ohara received the first message, it was disturbing. When another followed with worse news, he knew he'd made the greatest mistake of his life in taking Uncle Ushiro to the fish show. Of course, as he threaded his way through downtown Los Angeles traffic that Friday afternoon, such an idea had not occurred to him.

It was the first day of his long weekend off. He didn't mind driving Uncle to Little Tokyo—it was better than mowing the lawn. Their neighbor, Mas Shigekuni, had invited him to the Championship Koi Show that Mas' club was sponsoring.

The invitation was a godsend because since the old man had arrived from Japan, he'd exhausted all the usual sightseeing possibilities. And all that really interested Uncle was police work, so Ohara had called in every favor his colleagues owed him.

Uncle had ridden in police cars in three cities, visited the Sheriff's Communications Center, the Police Communications Center, the Crime Lab, and the County Jail. He'd flown in a police helicopter and cruised the harbor in a police launch—even visited the County Morgue. He'd come home from that quite green, but had still man-

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aged to contribute several unwanted bits of clinical information at the dinner table.

Ohara glanced across at the old man beside him, who was alertly watching for traffic violators. Uncle's pride was his brief career on the Utagawa Village police force over fifty years ago. He'd had to give it up to help his ailing father run the family farm, but the sacrifice had been hard. His most precious possession was a fading picture of himself in police uniform.

In his nephew, Isamu Ohara, the Los Angeles police detective, he could relive his vanished dream. Ohara, who understood, was patient with the endless questions and listened with grave attention to the old man's deluge of advice. Uncle drew his expertise from an avid study of the great detectives of literature. He knew by heart every case of Holmes, Maigret, Queen, Wolfe, the cops of the 87th Precinct, and others available in Japanese translation.

Waiting out a light, Ohara studied Uncle affectionately. Except for his halo of white hair, he didn't look his seventy-plus years. They were probably quite a bit plus, but neither age nor hard work had quenched his lust for adventure. The heavy cane beside him was mostly an adjunct to dignity, though it could also be a formidable weapon.

"Have you enjoyed your vacation, Uncle?" Ohara spoke in slow, careful English. Uncle's command of the language left much to be desired but he was determined to use his hard-won skill while in America.

"Yes, Isamu." Uncle disdained to use the short form "Sam," disliking even more "Irish" Ohara, as his nephew was called at the station.

"Only thing, Isamu. I not yet help catch any bad men."

Hastily, Ohara changed the subject. "After you enjoy the show, why don't you let me pick you up? I know you volunteered to help Mas with the security patrol, but—"

"You think I am too old, Isamu?" Uncle's tone was icy.

"Oh, no. But they will have security guards at the Village."

"They lent-a-cops." Under stress, Uncle had trouble putting "r" in the right place. "Bad men see easy. I plain clothes," he articulated carefully, and gestured to his old-fashioned black suit, white shirt, and straw hat. "Mas say he glad to have good man on job."

Ohara wondered just how glad Mas was. Uncle had enthusiastically planned the whole operation.

When they drew up in front of the Little Tokyo Village Plaza,

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Uncle got out and stood looking up at the antique Japanese fire tower which marked the entrance. It reminded him of his home village, as did the blue-tile roofs of the shops. When he entered the mall, familiar aromas drifted from restaurants and food stands. He followed a broad avenue that opened into small arcades of shops on either side. Neat signs pointed the way to the koi exhibit.

At last he came to a curving line of blue-plastic tanks filled with water and assorted varieties of koi. He noted with approval that the tanks were properly aerated and that the koi had already been segregated as to size. A crowd of fascinated spectators were exclaiming at the beautiful colors of the fish: blue, red, orange, silver, white touched with pink, gold, and inky black. Occasionally a fish, disturbed by the unaccustomed noise, would jump high out of the water, causing new excitement.

Mas was helping the judges transfer selected specimens to special tanks according to class, size, and conformation. He waved at Uncle, then concentrated on netting a promising yellow Ohgon, its body gleaming with the rich metallic shine of gold. When he had safely deposited the koi in a new tank, he came over to Uncle to exchange a courteous greeting. He pointed to a raised platform farther on. "Those are the Grand Champion entries. Judge Arthur Harvey is showing three of his." Uncle had read of Judge Harvey's collection in a Japanese koi journal and was impressed.

Uncle nodded and walked on, noting that several people wore jackets with a club emblem on the back. One read, "Nishiki Koi Club," another "Zen Nippon Karin Koi." Clubs from all over were represented.

The platform for the Grand Champion koi was bordered with a colorful display of potted chrysanthemums. Beside each tank was a sign noting the owner, previous championships, age, and other pertinent information. Two large Kohaku koi attracted his attention, their bright red markings sharp and well placed on plump white bodies. A fine Asagi koi with blue-grey back and orange fins, cheeks, and underside was in the next tank. Beside it, a well formed black Showa Sanke with brilliant white-and-red markings swam furiously about his small tank. There were other excellent koi but Uncle could see at once that Judge Harvey's entries were outstanding.

He showed a fine five-color Goshoku, and a rare peacock-colored Kujuku, but his third entry was the best. It was a Taisho Sanke of beautiful and perfect conformation. Uncle had never seen such in-

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tricate markings. They were inky-black highlighted here and there with red. Studying them, Uncle felt he might be looking at calligraphy brushed by a master. He found himself trying to pick out individual characters.

Even more remarkable was the Taisho Sanke's age of eighty-six years. "*Omedeto gosaimasu*," Uncle said softly, offering respectful congratulations for so beautiful and venerable a creature. Without question, this was a Champion of Champions.

Uncle went to sit on a small bench near the platform. It was next to an exit lane and well placed for him to keep an eye on the crowd. One woman, a Japanese, caught his attention. She was staring at the Taisho Sanke with a strange, bewildered expression. Her plain, strong face, greying hair, and sturdy body reminded him of an old-fashioned Japanese housewife more likely concerned with the price of groceries than champion koi, but she was obviously fascinated.

Four youths pushed their way through the crowd and up to the platform. All of them wore jeans with heavy nail-studded belts and red T-shirts with a black printed leopard on the chest. The oldest, much to Uncle's disgust, was Japanese. Ohara had told him about Los Angeles gang kids. Scandalized to find a Japanese among them, Uncle stared at the tough young face, the spiky short hair slicked up into a cockscomb.

The youths crowded close to the tanks, stamping their feet to make the fish jump. Uncle was about to intervene when a heavy-set man tapped the Japanese boy on the shoulder and gestured toward an adjacent shop entrance. Three of the boys followed him but the youngest remained goggling at the fish. They stood a few minutes in conversation, then the boys looked at one another briefly, nodded, and all but the young Japanese walked away. The man handed him what looked to be a roll of bills, spoke a moment longer, then left him.

A woman's scream brought Uncle's attention back to the crowd.

The Japanese woman was struggling with one of the American boys in a red T-shirt. The youth jerked her handbag from her arm and, shoving people aside, dived for the exit where Uncle stood. As the boy tried to push past him, Uncle thrust his stick expertly between the boy's legs, tripping him. Then he calmly placed one foot on the small of the culprit's back and the point of his cane on the boy's neck, forcing him to lie still. People were shouting for the security guard. Two husky men came to help Uncle, but they were not needed.

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"Attaboy, Pop", somebody said, and the spectators broke into applause. When the guard arrived, he looked at Uncle with respect. He returned her pocketbook to the Japanese lady, who came over to Uncle to bow her thanks. *"Arigato gozaimasu, iro iro o sewa ni narimashita,"* she said, offering the fullest gratitude for service of more than ordinary nature. Then she smiled, and her plain face looked almost pretty.

Courteously, Uncle replied in Japanese that it was nothing—he was, after all, a retired police officer. "Ushiro Ohara is my name."

She bowed even lower. "My name is Hana Nakano."

The guard interrupted. "You did a great job, Mister. Now if you and the lady will come with me, we'll get a complaint filed."

When the formalities had been completed, Hana invited Uncle for some refreshment and he accepted. As they sat over tea and pastry, conversation came easily. Uncle had not eaten alone with a woman like this since his wife had died and he found it very pleasant. Hana was not such a quiet little mouse as his dear Mariko, but he found himself liking her very much. She explained that she was a widow and lived alone in the new Nikei Village a few blocks away. Uncle told her his nephew had taken him on a tour of the village for senior citizens, with its splendid community center and beautiful garden. It even had a theater, library, and classrooms.

Uncle told her about his farm in Japan and his distinguished nephew, Lieutenant Isamu Ohara.

"I was born on a farm not far from Los Angeles," Hana said. "We grew vegetables for the market. My father also bred koi. I used to help him, and on my seventh birthday he gave me one just for myself. She learned to come to me when I clapped my hands and loved to eat from my fingers small special sushi I made. I called her Little Flower—sort of a play on words." She paused and looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I must be boring you. Anyway, when the war came, we were sent to camp like the other Japanese. We had only a few days to sell or dispose of our things. We entrusted Little Flower to a Caucasian friend, but when we returned he was gone—no one knew where."

Uncle wondered if he had blundered. His own brother had been sent to a place called Manzanar and Isamu had been born there. They didn't talk about that time. Perhaps he had led the conversation into inappropriately heavy confidences. Then he saw Mas in

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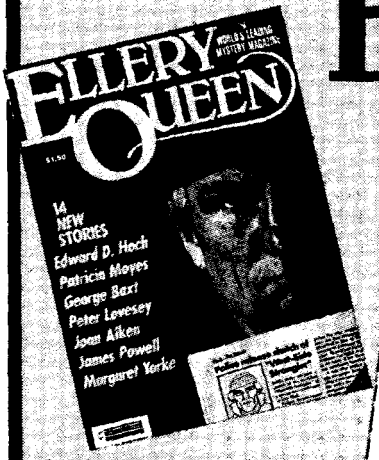

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the doorway, signaling to him. "My friend is calling to me," he said, standing up. I thank you for the refreshment, but I must go now."

Hana reached into her bag and took out a calling card, which she handed to him.

"This is my address. Perhaps you and your nephew would honor me by coming to dinner."

Uncle thanked her. He did not know that her eyes followed him as he walked, erect and dignified, to the door.

By eleven-thirty that night, though Uncle's spirit was still willing, his flesh was growing weaker. Mas had gone to get some hot coffee and, alone for the moment, he allowed himself to lean against the fire tower and rest his aching back. From where he stood, he could see the first of the plastic tanks.

Suddenly he heard shouting, and before he could move, he was pushed violently aside and his stick grabbed from his hand. A gang of boys raced past him, yelling and laughing as they banged on the glass storefronts. Even in the dim lights of the closed shops, there was no mistaking the red T-shirts and nail-studded belts.

Knowing that the guard was at the far end of the plaza, Uncle feared for the koi. He broke into a jerky run, but by the time he got to where he could see the main platform his legs were giving out. He staggered against a store window without enough breath left to shout at the dark figure bending over one of the tanks. Suddenly rough hands seized him and slammed him against the window. He slid to the ground, his fingers feebly clawing at a pair of jeans-clad legs. As his attacker pulled free, Uncle slumped onto his back. Before blackness closed in, he caught a brief glimpse of the Japanese face topped with a spiky cockscomb of hair.

Uncle woke to something wet running down his face and groaned at the sharpness of the pain in his head. With an effort, he sat up. Now there seemed to be two dark shapes struggling in front of the platform. The smaller of the two hit the other with something, knocking him down, then picked up a square box and ran out the exit. Standing up, Uncle managed to reach the sprawled figure, but his legs failed him and he fell clumsily across the body. With one hand he grabbed a leg, but his other hand slipped on a patch of water. Battling a renewed wave of dizziness, he felt rather than saw a small plastic-wrapped bundle. It might be important. With an effort, he closed his fingers around it and shoved it into his coat pocket . . .

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It was past midnight when Ohara's telephone rang with a message that sent him running to his car. How anything as innocent as a koi show could have landed Uncle in County Hospital was past his understanding.

When he arrived at the emergency room, a worried Mas rushed up to him and began a jumbled apology for letting Uncle be injured.

Ohara felt a tap on his shoulder. A tall morose-looking man showed a police ID which identified him as a Lieutenant Murdock, then asked, "You Isamu Ohara?"

"Yes," Ohara said.

"As I told you on the phone, we've got a man named Ushiro Ohara in emergency. I believe he's your uncle."

"How bad is he?" Ohara asked.

"Not too bad, considering. He's cut up some and has a concussion. He was lying on top of another man, holding on like a bulldog, when the patrol officer got there. Mr. Shigekuni here says they were on a security patrol together. Is that right, an old man like that?"

"My uncle's a former police officer," Ohara said. "May I see him?"

"Sure." Murdock led Ohara down a corridor to the treatment station. "We've got a Judge Harvey down at the station raising hell because his prize fish has been stolen. Maybe the old man knows something. He's been jabbering his head off, but I can't understand a word."

When they entered the emergency treatment room, Uncle was perched on an examining table, a pathetic, small figure with a bandage wound like a turban around his head. Relief flooded his face at the sight of his nephew and he burst into excited Japanese, gesticulating at the screened-off cubicle beside him.

"What's he saying?" Murdock asked.

"He says the man in the cubicle there was trying to steal a prize fish. He'd even put it into a carrier, but somebody else came along—one of the gang kids—knocked him down, took the carrier, and ran away."

"Your uncle held onto this one, anyway. His name's Benny Parsons, a small-timer with a rap sheet for robbery. This is the first time he's ever worked with a partner. Looks like he was double-crossed."

"*Hai, hai,*" Uncle erupted. He clutched at Ohara's sleeve and launched into rapid Japanese.

"He says he saw this man talking to some gang kids this after-

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noon," Ohara translated. "Near the fish tanks. It seems he gave them some money, they shook hands, and he walked away."

As Murdock wrote rapidly, Ohara continued, "Uncle can identify them. They wore red T-shirts decorated with a black leopard, and nail-studded belts. It was one of these boys who attacked him."

Uncle found his English at last. "I show you him," he said, and with help from Ohara he gave Murdock a verbal description of the Japanese boy.

"You're all right, Mr. Ushiro," Murdock said, closing his notebook. "We'll probably be asking you to come down to headquarters to see a lineup when we get them."

Uncle brightened. "I come," he promised.

The next morning, Uncle was extremely depressed. The Ohara family had been invited to a wedding in Santa Barbara. Though they offered to stay home with Uncle, he wouldn't hear of it. "I be fine," he insisted.

When they had gone, he picked up a Japanese-language newspaper from the day before. On the front page was a story of the koi show and a large picture of Judge Harvey's Taisho Sanke, which had already won fourteen grand championships.

The photograph was a closeup of the champion koi's markings. Seen this close, they looked even more like simplified Katakana calligraphy. Idly, Uncle let his imagination play with them. Here and there they actually seemed to make a character, and in one group almost a word, though it was not too distinct. He reached into his coat pocket for his glasses and something came along with them. It was a plastic-wrapped sushi. At first he could not imagine where it had come from, then he remembered. He'd found it last night when he'd fallen over the body of the thief. He must have put it into his pocket, thinking it might be evidence.

He dropped it on the table and put on his glasses. Again he studied the photograph. Yes, the markings in one particular spot could be construed into the Katakana characters of a Japanese word. He pronounced them slowly, separately, then again quickly. He'd heard them recently, but where? As he thought about it something else clicked into place. With rising excitement, he picked up the small plastic bundle and unwrapped it. The sushi looked normal. Then he smelled it and he was sure he was onto something.

He reviewed what he had seen the previous night. Unfortunately, the two men who had been struggling at the platform did not fit his

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new idea at all. That left the theory that Benny had been double-crossed by a partner. Though Murdock had said he always worked alone, it was unlikely that two separate attempts to steal the koi would happen at the same time.

Then he remembered what the great Sherlock Holmes had said. "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

There was no time to waste. He stuffed the newspaper and plastic-wrapped sushi into his pocket and checked to see that he had what he needed. After some difficulty, he managed to call a taxi. When it came, he showed the address to the driver and they were off. The journey gave him time to think—and time to become a little uneasy at what he was about to do.

When they arrived, the driver, who was not sure his elderly passenger with the bandaged head could make it alone, took him to the right building, then left in the glowing righteousness of a good deed done.

On the third ring of the doorbell, the door opened on a chain and Hana Nakano looked out. At once the chain was removed and the door opened wide. She welcomed Uncle in Japanese and added, "Ohara san, I am so glad you have come to call. Come in, please, and sit down."

Uncle entered but he did not sit down. Instead he stood staring at her, a most peculiar expression on his face. "Black trousers," he said. "Of course."

Hana blushed. "I was cleaning house. Slacks are most convenient." She apologized because men of Uncle's generation did not expect women her age to wear fitted trousers. "Please, you must sit down. I heard on the radio that you had been hurt." She made a small sympathetic gesture toward the bandage, then took his arm and led him over to the sofa.

"Thank you," Uncle said. He sat stiffly, glad to do so because his head hurt and also it postponed what he had to say.

"I shall make tea." Hana started for the kitchen.

"No tea."

She turned back, surprised at the sharpness in his voice.

"I have come for Hanako," Uncle said.

For a moment she stood rigid, fear flickering in her face, then she asked, "How did you know?"

Uncle felt off balance. This wasn't the way it went in detective stories. He had not yet begun his interrogation and she was already

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confessing. "I police-trained," he said with dignity, as if that explained everything. Then he pulled out the newspaper and pointed to the markings he found. "You see, they seem to make the word, Hanako, Little Flower. You told me your pet koi's name was a play on words. You meant on your own name—Hana."

She sat staring at the telltale markings. Then he took out the sushi roll. "You also said you made special rolls for koi. So do I, with a particular powder that smells like nothing else. This one was beneath Hanako's tank."

"Yes," Hana said. "I did take Hanako." Then she looked up at him, her eyes defiant. "But I did not steal her, I saved her. When I tell you, you will understand why."

Uncle knew that criminals always made excuses, but the look on Hana's face moved him. Her small square hand came to rest trustfully on his knee.

"I will listen," he said.

"When I first saw the Taisho Sanke yesterday, I knew it was my Hanako. I have stroked that name place on her back too often to be mistaken. She looked so tired and lonely. She was used to being loved and played with, not dragged from place to place and stared at by noisy crowds. I wanted to comfort her, so I came late at night when I thought no one would be there. I brought her the sushi she had always loved.

"When I arrived, I saw this dreadful man dig into the tank with a net, lift my Hanako out, and shove her into a plastic carrier. He did not care if he injured or killed her. I couldn't let him take her, so I picked up one of the chrysanthemums and hit him with the pot. Then I grabbed the carrier and ran away. Please believe me, I didn't go to steal her. I planned to see Judge Harvey and try to buy her back."

Poor thing, Uncle thought, she wouldn't have enough money to buy a champion koi. He sat in silence, looking at her, wishing he'd not solved the crime at all. "Where is Hanako now?" he asked.

"Wait, please." Hana went into the kitchen, coming back shortly with a small plate of sushi rolls covered with a napkin. "This way," she said and led him back outside the apartment.

After a short walk, they arrived at the beautiful Japanese garden of the complex. There was a waterfall pool landscaped with water lilies and rocks. They sat on the edge of the pool. Hana put down the plate of sushi, then she clapped her hands sharply and dipped her fingers into the water, wiggling them back and forth. "There

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she comes!" she said, pointing to the Taisho Sanke swimming majestically toward her. It leaped clear of the water and nuzzled Hana's outstretched hand. Taking one of the sushi, Hana held it out and the beautiful koi ate hungrily. Side by side, Uncle and Hana sat feeding Hanako and playing with her, to all appearances just two senior citizens enjoying the pond.

When the koi had swum contentedly back under the water lilies, Hana looked at Uncle. The conflict between his feelings and his duty was mirrored in his face. He was finding for the first time that a policeman's lot is not always a happy one.

"You think she must go back, don't you?"

"That would be the honorable thing to do." It was all he could find to say.

"Then I will do it," Hana said bravely, but her eyes filled with tears as she stood up to go.

Uncle took her arm and pulled her down beside him again. "Wait, Hana. Though your intentions were good, when you ran away with Hanako you broke the law. Also there is the matter of hitting the man with the flower pot. You would surely be arrested. I must see if I can find a better way." He patted her shoulder gently. "I would like that tea now."

"I think better than tea, Ushiro." Hana paused, afraid she had been too bold in using his first name. But Uncle showed no affront, so she went on, "I think dinner would be better."

They went back to Hana's apartment, where Uncle enjoyed a meal cooked just to his liking. And between them they came up with a plan.

When Ohara and Peggy returned, much later than they'd intended, they found the apartment empty. Ohara called Mas Shigekuni, but his phone did not answer. He tried a neighbor, who told him he had seen Uncle go away in a taxi during the afternoon. Grimly, he began calling the hospitals—only a little relieved to find that Uncle wasn't there, either. Finally, he called Murdock.

Murdock was worried, too. "I'll put out a bulletin right away."

Around midnight, while Ohara waited by the phone, Uncle and Hana were driving her elderly sedan with Hanako in the carrier in the back seat. At Tokyo Village Plaza, she stopped beside the little side lane she had used the previous night.

"Oh, Ushiro, I am afraid for you," she said as Uncle got out and lifted the carrier from the back seat.

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"Don't worry, Hana san" he reassured her. "I will return Hanako safely and no one will be the wiser."

In that he was completely wrong.

Murdock called Ohara a half hour later. "Sorry, Ohara, but we've had to take your uncle into custody. He was caught with the stolen fish. We don't think he stole it, but he won't tell us where he got it. You'd better come down to the station and see if you can get him to talk."

In a little over twenty minutes Ohara walked up to the desk sergeant. "I'm Ohara. I want to see—" He got no further. His arm was pulled violently.

He turned to face a small Japanese woman, who hung onto him with determination.

"I'm sorry, sir," the sergeant said, "but she's been here almost an hour asking to see Ohara san. I told her we'd sent for you."

Hana let go of Ohara at once. "Excuse me. I not want you—I want Ushiro. You must take me to him."

"How do you know my uncle?"

Hana was impatient. "They have arrested him, but it is me they should arrest. Only Ushiro will never tell them."

"Come with me," Ohara said. He led her down the corridor to the interrogation room.

The small room was crowded. Uncle sat at a table flanked by Murdock and an officer with a notebook. Another man sat opposite.

"Who's the lady?" Murdock asked.

"A witness," Ohara answered and looked at Hana to explain.

"My name is Hana Nakano and—"

"No!" Uncle said sternly.

Murdock held up a hand. "All in good time, lady. Maybe now we'll get somewhere." Then he introduced the other man present as Judge Harvey. "He owns the fish," he said.

"Uncle," Ohara said gently, "you know you must explain where you got the koi. That's all. Everyone knows you didn't steal it."

"Koi back," Uncle said stubbornly. "No crime now. No explain."

Ohara, equally stubborn, turned to Hana. "Perhaps you'd better explain."

Hana looked at Uncle. "I must tell, Ushiro. It is only honorable."

When Hana had finished her story, Murdock slapped his hands down on the table. "What a mess. We've got a foreign national accessory to a crime, a confession that sounds like a fairy story, and

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Benny will probably sue for assault and false arrest. So what do we do now?"

"We'll do nothing," Judge Harvey said. "My Taisho Sanke is back and I don't intend to press charges against these people. As for the man who tried to steal her, if he attempts to sue anyone I'll press charges against him for attempted robbery."

Murdock almost smiled. But the judge had not finished. "Ohara san, you have done me a great service. I sincerely thank you. As for this lady—"Judge Harvey turned and looked gravely at Hana. "Madam, I want you to know that I bought your Hanako in good faith in an estate sale. I have always felt that great injustice was done to the Japanese Americans. I regret that even innocently I became part of it."

Uncle stood up. "Harvey san, I—" he looked at Hana "—we want to buy Hanako. Please?"

The judge looked at Hana's hopeful face, but shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. He felt the emotional shock go around the room, but went on as if expressing judgment. "I know how much I owe you both, but I want to see Hanako win her last championship. Then I will present her to her rightful owner." He smiled at Hana. "In this case, I feel that reparation would be the only honorable thing."

There was a long silence in the room.

"That's it, then," said Murdock, clearing his throat. And everyone began to leave. Judge Harvey walked ahead with Hana, talking about Hanako. When Uncle started to follow, Murdock stopped him. "I just want to say that was a fine piece of police work, Mr. Ushiro."

Beaming, Uncle accepted the cherished praise, then left with Ohara. But it was obvious something was on his mind. Once outside the room, he pulled Ohara aside. "I must speak, Isamu. I want you to do something for me right away. Very important."

"Of course, Uncle. What is it?"

"I want you be *nakodo* for me with Hana."

Ohara looked stunned. "I'm honored, Uncle—but are you sure?"

"Not act fast, I lose," Uncle said and hurried after Judge Harvey and Hana.

"What's this?" Murdock broke in suspiciously. "Something to do with the case?"

"In a way," Ohara replied. "My uncle has asked me to be a go-between for him. It's an old Japanese custom. I'm to find out if Mrs. Nakano might consent to marry him."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

"Defender, indeed," scoffed Mrs. Rosewood. "How twelve presumably responsible jurymen could have swallowed that preposterous tale about a struggle and Harley's gun going off by accident, *in his own hand, I'll never understand . . ."*

CHARITY ENDS AT HOME

by DONALD OLSON

The departure of Mrs. Rosewood, so abruptly and with the swiftness of flight, excited a tempest of rumors among the ladies of the Garden District. Over bridge games and margaritas those most loyal to that redoubtable fixture of New Orleans society attributed her disappearance to bereavement—and shock, of course—at the outcome of what Mrs. Rosewood called "that comic travesty of a trial." Others, with a tincture of malice in their natures, were heard to wonder if perhaps dear Beryl had a little business up North—a sly allusion to Mrs. Rosewood's oft-repeated explanation of Mr. Rosewood's quite as hasty and even more mysterious disappearance ten years earlier. "Elverton?" she would reply with a disarming candor, arching those magnificent brows. "Oh, didn't I tell you? He had a little business up North." In time, this remark became something of a joke among the ladies of the Garden District, and when any male member of that society was rumored to be playing around someone was sure to quip: "A little business up North, do you suppose?"

At this point in time, it's quite impossible to separate fact from rumor, especially as to events *after* Mrs. Rosewood left New Orleans. Details of the tragedy culminating in the trial are, of course, public knowledge. Mrs. Rosewood's son Harley was shot to death with his

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own gun in a scuffle with another youth, allegedly trying to steal gasoline at the filling station where Harley worked. The youth, a drifter named Kip Cavender, was tried and convicted on a reduced charge of involuntary manslaughter.

So much for fact. That Missy Quintain accompanied Mrs. Rosewood when she left the city was by no means universally accepted as the truth. Although renowned for her charitable disposition, Mrs. Rosewood had expressed her opinion of Missy Quintain in most *un*-charitable language. Where unsuitable fiancées and unwed mothers were concerned, it might be said of Mrs. Rosewood that charity ended at home. So why, it was asked, would she take the girl with her? It didn't make sense. Missy, that shy, flower-eyed wisp of a girl, had escaped the publicity of the trial owing to Mrs. Rosewood's lawyer's decision that she be kept entirely out of the picture—his reason being that it might be difficult to paint for the jury a wholly unblemished picture of young Harley were it to be revealed that he had been working overtime at the filling station to earn enough money to procure an abortion for the girl he got pregnant.

As it happened, Mrs. Rosewood did indeed take the girl with her, and for the past eleven months they had been sequestered, as remote as two nuns in a rustic hermitage, at Mrs. Rosewood's "farm" a hundred miles north of N.O. near the hamlet of Solidago, a speck of a town unnoted on even the most detailed map of the region. The property was no longer even a working farm, and the plantation house itself, called Bittersweet, had declined over the years into a state of semi-decay, livable but of no interest to any but those roving journalists who rejoice in discovering such out-of-the-way monuments to picturesque desolation, enshrining them in coffee-table books of photographic essays where, in artful chiaroscuro, paint-flaking Corinthian pillars are glimpsed through a sea of unmown grass, grimy windows reflect ruined statuary, and ghostly tendrils of Spanish moss frame vistas of dilapidated outbuildings.

That Mrs. Rosewood should have undergone a drastic change of attitude toward Missy Quintain came as an even greater surprise to the girl herself, albeit a welcome one. Alone, frightened, pregnant, and penniless, Missy had scuttled happily into the protective custody of Mrs. Rosewood's benevolence, where she was fed and sheltered and nursed through complications ensuing from a miscarriage three months after Harley's death. But her spine was affected and for months Missy could scarcely walk more than a few steps without support.

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In time, however, she improved until one day in early June Mrs. Rosewood came into her room and dropped a writing pad and pen on her bed. "Child, you still don't look strong enough to swat a fly, but we can't delay any longer. It's time you wrote to him."

"Wrote to him?" Missy had no one to write to—no friends, no family.

"To Mr. Kip Cavender."

Missy looked blank. By tacit agreement, neither of them had ever mentioned that young man's name—they had come to Bittersweet to recover from the trauma of those horrific events, not to dwell upon them. "But he killed Harley. Whyever should I write to him?" The notion seemed as extraordinary as the glittering smile expanding on Mrs. Rosewood's face, a patrician face framed in a wreath of darkening gold hair.

"Because," she explained, "he's a 'poor, deprived orphan, a victim of circumstance and society's neglect.' I quote, needless to say, the words of that so-called Public Defender. Ha! Defender, indeed. How twelve presumably responsible jurymen could have swallowed that preposterous tale about a struggle and Harley's gun going off by *accident,* in his own hand, I'll never understand. To think that murderous vagabond will remain locked up for only eighteen months!"

The vigor of Mrs. Rosewood's resentment astonished Missy, who had assumed from the lady's silence on the matter that she had succeeded in putting the whole affair behind her.

"Now don't look so worried, child," said Mrs. Rosewood, perching on the side of the bed and stroking tendrils of pale-red hair away from the girl's colorless face. "*I* shall actually compose the letter. All you must do is copy it in your own handwriting and sign it. It must *appear* to come from you. Well, the wretch doesn't know you. You weren't in that courtroom. He never heard your name spoken."

Missy's forget-me-not-blue eyes stared up into the gleaming grey ones above her as if they were but two pieces of a bewildering jigsaw puzzle. "But why write to him? I don't understand."

"You will, child, you will. Now here's the first letter for you to copy. We shall pray it will be *only* the first. I think you'll agree I have a gift for epistolary composition. I wish you could have read some of my letters to Mr. Rosewood before we were married. Oh, yes, I'm confident we may expect a reply. The boy is quite alone in the world. He's certain to be touched by a letter from another orphan, one who heard about his trial and has been moved to write to him out of sympathy for his predicament."

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A troubled frown settled on Missy's face. "But *why?* It still don't make no sense to me."

"Patience, child. It will. Now let's get busy. When Old Sam brings our weekly provisions, we must have the letter ready for him to mail in Solidago."

Thus began an exchange of letters to and from Bittersweet and the state prison, the former marked by a smoothly deceptive sentimentality, the latter by an artless, awkward expression of gratitude that an unknown young woman should take an interest in Kip Cavender's problems. Although much of the content of the letters Missy copied was supplied by Missy herself—her life in various foster homes and how she was at present recovering from an unspecified illness at the home of her "Aunt Bea" in the country—Mrs. Rosewood interwove details of her own early life at Bittersweet. Kip Cavender's letters in reply were scarcely literate compared with Missy's. Yet it was this unaccustomed struggle to put thought into words that gave to the boy's letters a pathetic eloquence. When Mrs. Rosewood passed them on to Missy to read, the girl was stirred almost to tears by Kip Cavender's hard-luck saga, devoid of self-pity but betraying a hopelessness and a depth of loneliness equal to her own.

Mrs. Rosewood chided Missy for being so gullible. "He's a hypocrite, my dear—as well as a thief and a killer."

"If you believe that, why go on writing to him?" Missy inquired.

"I have my reasons," Mrs. Rosewood replied inscrutably.

As time passed and the correspondence progressed, a most curious thing began to happen. The letters Mrs. Rosewood composed grew longer, and a subtle change of tone in them added to Missy's bewilderment. Precisely what it was in the letters that filled Missy with a thickening disquietude remained indefinable until certain phrases brought illumination: Mrs. Rosewood was beginning to write to young Kip Cavender in such a way that one might have thought the letters were intended for Elverton Rosewood, her long-vanished husband.

Yes, it was unmistakable. In letters disguised as being from a lonely, delicate girl to an imprisoned convict, Mrs. Rosewood seemed to be expressing her own long-repressed feelings of loneliness and abandonment, exposing for the first time, behind a mask as it were, a profound agony of loss and emotional emptiness. Missy's first clue to this extraordinary and presumably unconscious transfer came in

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a letter where Mrs. Rosewood wrote: "Last night I dreamt you came to see me here at Bittersweet and we walked together under the willows, you so tall and fair, your hair like washed gold in the moonlight . . ."

Missy, reclining in a wicker chaise on the upper gallery as she copied this letter, could not stifle a discreet giggle as she reached this passage. Mrs. Rosewood glanced up sharply from her embroidery.

"And what do you find so amusing, pray tell?"

Missy read the passage aloud, then said: "It don't make sense. You said Kip Cavender was an ugly little runt with dark curly hair."

Mrs. Rosewood flushed. "Oh—yes. You're right. What could I have been thinking about?"

With a sidelong, innocent look, Missy said: "Mr. Rosewood, maybe? Sounds to me like him, judging by the photos you've shown me."

Mrs. Rosewood concentrated on her needlework. "Well, change it. Scratch out 'tall and fair' and make it 'your hair like polished ebony in the moonlight.' "

At about this same time, Mrs. Rosewood began taking a deeper interest in Missy's appearance, allowed the girl to wear some of her own good jewelry, and insisted upon arranging her hair in a style resembling Mrs. Rosewood's in photographs taken at the age of nineteen. And when Kip Cavender begged for a picture of Missy, Mrs. Rosewood produced a sepia-toned photograph of herself as a girl.

"Here, we'll send him this," she decided.

Missy giggled. "We *can't*. He'd know the picture's older than I am."

Mrs. Rosewood nodded vaguely. "I daresay you're right. Well, we'll have Old Sam bring a film for my camera on Friday. We'll take a snap of you and send that."

Posed in front of the pillared façade of Bittersweet, with Missy sitting on a wrought-iron bench, the snapshot might have been an up-to-date duplicate in pose and setting of that old photograph of Mrs. Rosewood. In any case, it clearly enchanted Kip Cavender, whose subsequent letters betrayed an increasingly sentimental ardor. By now, not surprisingly, Missy was indulging in equally romantic daydreams about Kip Cavender, although she took care to hide these secret raptures from Mrs. Rosewood, who took it for granted Missy was still heartbroken over Harley's death.

Actually, Missy had all but forgotten him. Oh, it had been very

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pleasant at the start, those long flirtatious chats with Harley at the Redbird Diner, where Missy had worked behind the counter—even if she sometimes tired of listening to Harley run on about his mama, the way she kept a tight fist on the pursestrings, obliging him to take that odious job at the filling station. Looking back now, Missy came to realize that Harley had used her as an escape from his mother, that their feelings for each other, although physically intense, had lacked any real depth of sentiment.

Meanwhile, the hair-like-washed-gold-in-the-moonlight slip had been followed by others even more egregious as the time for Kip Cavender's release from prison grew closer and Mrs. Rosewood's attitude of nervous excitement became more pronounced. (By now it was understood that Kip would pay a visit to Bittersweet immediately upon his release.)

"So many things will look different to you," Mrs. Rosewood wrote. "But I can't wait for us to revisit our old haunts. The wishing pond—the bury patch—"

Missy was now making corrections without consulting Mrs. Rosewood unless necessary. The older woman always reread Missy's copies before putting them in envelopes, and now, scanning this latest, she uttered an amused reproach: "As you must have noticed, child, I'm an exceptionally accurate speller. The word is *not* berry, it's bury. Bury patch. Bury as *inter*. Bury as in *grave*. Come along, I'll show you."

Together, Missy leaning on Mrs. Rosewood's arm, they made their way for the first time along an overgrown path through the sycamores to where in a grove of cypresses the ancient family burial plot lay encircled by a nearly impenetrable barrier of wild blackberry bushes.

As Missy reached out to pluck one of the ripened berries, Mrs. Rosewood uttered a quick warning: "Careful, child. That one may be all right, but you mustn't take chances. See how they're all mixed in with those smaller berries that look like purple currants? They are poisonous, my dear. They used to say some noxious emanation from the graves contaminated the berries and polluted the whole patch. When we were young, we called this graveyard the bury patch. Eat the fruit and they'll bury you, we said."

Missy regarded the shiny, lethal pellets with a shudder of loathing. Before they returned to the house, Mrs. Rosewood picked a handful of the berries and then, with a laugh, scattered them into the air.

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That Mrs. Rosewood might be mad did not actually enter Missy's mind, whose conception of madness required visible demonstrations of raving lunacy—she had had no experience with the more subtle manifestations of emotional disorder. Furthermore, to her Mrs. Rosewood had always inspired a feeling of awe. She was from another world, a society lady, a person of distinguished family background. And so this feeling of vague apprehensiveness that developed slowly in Missy's mind remained too formless to be characterized as any suspicion of madness.

Only when her benefactress began to speak about Mr. Rosewood did Missy suspect that Harley's death might have implanted a seed of derangement in Mrs. Rosewood's brain.

"What I don't understand," Missy ventured to remark one afternoon as they sipped lemonade on the green-shadowed gallery, "is why you never tried to locate him. Or did you?"

Mrs. Rosewood flashed the girl an imperious look. "One has one's pride, after all. It comes with the position."

"Position?"

"In society, child!"

"But how do you know something awful didn't happen to him? I mean, you said he had business up North. What if he had some terrible accident or something and lost his memory?"

When Mrs. Rosewood replied, after a lengthy hesitation, Missy suspected that the older woman was revealing information she was not in the habit of confiding.

"Nonsense," she said. "He's alive and presumably in command of all his faculties. *Where* he is, I have no idea. But there are those who do know and choose not to disclose the information. Especially, one assumes, to me. On those rare occasions when it becomes necessary for me to communicate with Mr. Rosewood—business affairs, you understand—I am obliged to do so via some faceless entity representing the Dixie Trust Company of New Orleans. *Why* Mr. Rosewood chose to desert me I haven't the smidget of a clue. I did not try to *run* his life. I did not, as he never tired of accusing me, try to *stifle* his nobler impulses. The man was a dreamer. He failed to appreciate the structural importance of society. Any more than did Harley. There was always, I know now, a gypsy element in Elverton Rosewood's blood. He should have been a poet or a painter. He dabbled in both. I'm obliged to admit, alas, that he married me for my money. Regrettably, he had nothing but scorn for the social obligations attached to it."

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"But when Harley was killed, didn't you expect him to come back?"

As if regretting what she had already revealed, Mrs. Rosewood adopted her most regal manner. "Not really. No. Elverton was never, I think, cut out to be a family man. And the publicity would have been repugnant to him."

"If you'd written to him, though. Told him you needed him—"

"I do not *need* him," retorted Mrs. Rosewood with a flush which seemed to Missy to belie the lady's words.

"What if he did come back? Would you forgive him?"

Behind the crystal vacancy of those pale-grey eyes, Missy detected the tremor of some painful thought. Mrs. Rosewood looked away. "What does it matter now? He'll never come back. He has his own sort of pride."

For the first time, Missy felt the stirring of an emotion other than mere gratitude toward Mrs. Rosewood. She had glimpsed an unexpected vulnerability, a hidden depth of anguish. Missy understood now that in some peculiar, twisted way, Mrs. Rosewood's letters to Kip Cavender, no matter what inscrutable, private motive had inspired them, masked a deeper, secret impulse. At the same time, Missy, despite her uncomplicated nature, was perceptive enough to understand the role she herself had been chosen to play in all this—that Mrs. Rosewood had been driven by something other than charity to befriend her. This did not so much grieve as sadden Missy. She felt only sympathy in realizing that when Mrs. Rosewood looked at her with that faraway, wistful expression she was not seeing Missy at all, but herself as a young girl.

A week before Kip Cavender was due for release, Mrs. Rosewood called Missy into the sewing room, flung the scissors back into the basket, stabbed the pincushion with her needle, and tossed the dress she had been altering aside.

"There. Finished. Slip it on, child."

Missy dutifully drew the dress over her thin shoulders. Mrs. Rosewood fussily adjusted the lace collar and tugged at the hem. "Very fetching. Yes, you'll look quite the young society lady. Waiting for her gentleman caller. Well, don't just stand there, child. Take it off and I'll iron it."

"Do I have to wear it?"

"But of course."

"I don't like it. It makes me feel funny," Missy said, watching Mrs. Rosewood iron the dress. She had worn it only once before, to

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Harley's funeral. She had been pregnant then—hence the need for alterations. "What if he doesn't come?" Missy inquired anxiously.

"He'll come. He promised."

Missy hesitated. "What if he *does* come?"

Mrs. Rosewood shrugged. "He's a country boy. He'll consider himself very fortunate indeed to remain at Bittersweet. After all, he owes you a very great debt. Never fear, child, *he'll* never desert *you*. Not like Elverton Rosewood deserted me."

Missy felt that crawling uncertainty which had grown more palpable over the past few weeks. "I thought you hated Kip. Really hated him."

Mrs. Rosewood smiled. "I thought I hated Elverton, too. I thought I would hate him for the rest of my life."

Treading lightly, as if uncertain how far she dared probe into those secrets of the heart, Missy said quietly, "The letters—they made you change your mind?"

Mrs. Rosewood's reaction—a slight, inquisitive tilt of the brows—implied only the faintest rebuke. "Letters? I don't know what you mean. Time, child. Time is what changes everything. The merciless miracle of time."

"Harley—maybe I shouldn't say this—but he was wrong about you. He said you weren't the saint everyone said you were. Sometimes he talked as if he hated you."

Mrs. Rosewood dismissed this with a forbearing smile. "Harley was like his father. Impractical. Always expecting me to dish out the money. No need to work. Irresponsible. Getting you in the fix he did. Oh, I know I blamed you, child, but that was only the grief speaking."

Poor Mrs. Rosewood, thought Missy, a victim of her own pride. If only there was something *I* could do for *her*. Some way I could help.

She thought about it at length and in the end could decide on only one possible course of action—a hopeless endeavor, she felt sure, yet she determined to give it a try. She was well acquainted with Mrs. Rosewood's handwriting by now but not so sure she could produce a convincing imitation of it. Alone in her room that night she began to practice.

The day before Kip was to arrive, Mrs. Rosewood stood regarding herself in the mirror with a critical frown of dismay. "What a sight I am. My friends would scarcely recognize me." She had been so preoccupied with Missy's appearance she had neglected her own.

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"I wonder if they still have that little shop in Solidago. That girl there used to do my hair quite acceptably. Yes, perhaps a light rinse and a set. And I'll wear my coral shantung. I think we'll drive over there tomorrow morning, and be back before your young man arrives."

For some reason Missy failed to understand, Mrs. Rosewood arbitrarily vetoed the idea of driving the aging Cadillac down to Lily Vale twelve miles away, the nearest bus stop to Bittersweet. She murmured vaguely about their being much too busy preparing dinner to make the long drive. Kip would simply have to walk from the bus stop. He wouldn't mind, she insisted. After being locked up for so long he'd no doubt welcome the hike.

Consequently, the following morning, dressed in their finery, the two women prepared to drive to Solidago. Just before leaving, with Missy already in the car, Mrs. Rosewood clucked her tongue and said, "To be on the safe side, we had better leave a note on the door. Should we be delayed or should he arrive earlier than expected, we want him to know he's welcome to go in."

She returned to the house and remained inside for several minutes before coming out and affixing a note to the door. Then they were off, Mrs. Rosewood driving with unaccustomed recklessness over the rutted back country road to Solidago.

The girl who had formerly done her hair, it transpired, was long gone, although the shop behind the barber's was still in business. Missy waited while Mrs. Rosewood had her hair done, an interminable process owing to the lady's dissatisfaction with the first three styles the operator suggested. And upon leaving the shop, Mrs. Rosewood discovered she was "frightfully hungry" and so they stopped at the Periwinkle Café for coffee and sandwiches. Missy grew anxious and tried to hurry the older woman along, but Mrs. Rosewood, a hectic flush on her cheeks, would not be rushed.

"We have worlds of time, child. Why, his bus must only be pulling into Lily Vale just about now."

To Missy's profound annoyance, Mrs. Rosewood took it into her head that while in Solidago she absolutely must pay a brief courtesy call on old Mrs. Studevant, the erstwhile housekeeper at Bittersweet. That lady, they soon learned, had died five years ago, so then Mrs. Rosewood felt obliged to visit the little cemetery three miles away where the old lady was buried.

"*Do* stop fretting, child. It's not as if he'll find the door locked to

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him. And he'll see the note inviting him to go in and make himself at home."

"But I wanted everything to be perfect," Missy cried. "And there's the dinner to prepare."

Mrs. Rosewood chuckled. "So what if he enjoys his dessert before the main course?"

"Dessert?"

"My pie. I left it on the table with a little note urging him to help himself if he arrived before us. After that long, long walk, the poor boy's sure to be ravenous."

A visible pattern, the component parts of which until that moment had been no more than indecipherable fragments, began taking shape in Missy's mind. "Pie? What kind of pie?"

"I baked it last night, while you were in bed."

"*What kind of pie?*"

Mrs. Rosewood smiled. "Why, blackberry, of course."

"*Blackberry?* But you said—you don't mean the blackberries you showed me? The ones you warned me about!"

"I picked them last night."

Missy gaped at her. "Dear God in heaven, what have you *done?* If he gets there before us and . . . *Why?* Why did you do it?"

Mrs. Rosewood was driving now with unnecessary caution, even though the sun hung low on the horizon and shadows deepened and distorted the ruts in the country road. Her voice when she spoke remained as imperturbable as her expression. "A drifter, child. Nothing but a drifter. It's in his blood. Same as Elverton. Do you imagine for a moment that he would remain at Bittersweet of his own free will? Don't delude yourself, child." She reached across and patted Missy reassuringly on the arm. "But don't you fret. We're going to make sure he *does* stay there. All the rest of his life. He won't desert you the way Elverton deserted me."

Missy began to shake. "That's why you didn't want us to fetch him in the car. That's why you wanted him to walk all that way. All that long, hot way. So he'd be hungry. Hungry enough to—"

"Eat the pie! *Yes.* Well, heavens above, child, would you *rather* he deserted you?"

"You're insane!"

Mrs. Rosewood didn't reply, for now they were turning off the road into the long approach to Bittersweet.

When they reached the house, Mrs. Rosewood, humming to her-

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self, parked the car with excessive care under the live oak tree. Missy flung open the door and stumbled out. She was halfway to the verandah when Mrs. Rosewood seized her arm. "I'll go in first, child. You wait right here. Save your strength. You'll need all the strength you can muster in a little while. It'll be a chore in itself just cutting through the brambles around the bury patch. And I suppose I'll have to do *all* the digging."

Missy remained, stiff and cold as one of the ruined statues leering through the laurel branches alongside the drive. She watched as Mrs. Rosewood marched confidently up the steps, gaily swinging the handbag on her arm. Just as the door closed behind her, Missy heard a voice cry out from the direction of the old logging road opening out of the woods. She turned and saw him approach, draggingly but with a smile on his young, perspiring face. A slim, short figure with curly dark hair, wearing faded jeans and a blue work shirt and carrying a duffle bag.

Life rushed back into Missy's limbs. "Kip? Kip? Is that you?"

He advanced toward her out of the shadows. "Sure is. You gotta be Missy. You look just like your picture." His shoulders sagged as he uttered a vast groan of weariness. "Man, I sure am tuckered out. Damn fool bus was more'n two hours late and then didn't I get lost along the way. I'd sure be mighty thankful for a cold drink of water."

At that instant the lowering twilight was rent by a human scream—a single, piercing scream followed by as terrible a silence. Missy paled, then hurried toward the house, Kip trailing behind her.

She stopped dead at the dining-room door. Mrs. Rosewood leaned heavily against the sideboard, her body shaking convulsively, her head turned away from the figure slumped over the table. From the doorway Missy could not see any hair like washed gold, no features matching those of the young man in Mrs. Rosewood's many photographs beside the half-empty pie pan, yet even if she had not recognized the envelope in which she had sent the letter in Mrs. Rosewood's handwriting beseeching the wanderer to come home, Missy would still have known.

Elverton Rosewood had returned.

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A *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL HARRISON

One of Michael Harrison's major contributions to the mystery genre has been his excellent pastiches of Edgar Allan Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin, twelve of which were collected in Murder in the Rue Royale. *The following story, which Mr. Harrison describes as "an episode in Sloane-street, Chelsea, 22nd June, 1817," reaches us just in time to honor the 175th anniversary of Poe's birth (January 19, 1809) and the 135th anniversary of his death (October 7, 1849).*

"Though the episode is wholly imaginary," writes Mr. Harrison, "all the principal characters are real, and the background of Mrs. Frances Dubourg's school for Young Gentlemen, here revealed for the first time through the author's research, is completely authentic—differing fundamentally though it may from all hitherto accepted descriptions of Edgar Allan Poe's early life . . ."

THEY HANG THIEVES, DON'T THEY?

by MICHAEL HARRISON

Eddie Allan—for so he was entered on the register of Mrs. John Dubourg's school—looked at the back garden of No. 146, Sloane-street through tear-blurred eyes. He was eight years old and to look through the window at the empty garden he had had to stand on a chair.

There is no misery like that of a child, and Eddie's misery was all the deeper for its having several causes. In the first place, his pa

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and ma were two hundred miles away from London: taking the waters—whatever that meant—in Cheltenham. In the second place (a direct consequence of the first), Eddie would have to spend his summer holidays alone in this scholar-deserted school. In all the joyous excitement of the breaking-up—an excitement which threatened often to become a sort of mass hysteria—Eddie had taken no part. Private carriages and hackney-cabs had collected small boys and their luggage, and had whipped both off to the private houses or stagecoach termini for which the lads had been making. No carriage or cab had called for Eddie, and as Mrs. Dubourg had put her arm around the little American and pressed him tenderly against her rustling black silk Eddie had sobbed in all the agony of total exclusion.

He loved Mrs. Dubourg—born Frances Fortune—and he was to love her all the days of his life. Even her name, Frances, become for him something sacred, so that he was never able to hear it in after years without being deeply moved.

But now, as the other boys poured out of the tall brick-built house facing the Five Fields, Eddie's sadness offered no response to Frances Dubourg's consoling.

"There, there, Eddie, don't take on so! I know that you aren't to spend your vacation with your pa and ma, but surely you won't mind spending it with us?" Eddie still sobbed, and she pressed his small body even more tightly against her. "Then there's your granduncle Samuel, who's invited you to go to the theatre to see Mr. Kean. And you can go again to Grosvenor-street, to see your Uncle Dick's truly splendid models of ancient Greece and Rome. Why, Eddie, what a little muff you are to cry so! Why, you and I shall have a most agreeable holiday!"

Eddie still wept, but now in rather a snivelling than in a sobbing way—and perhaps he would not still have been weeping had not the terrible thing happened, just before the last of the departing boys had left. Joshua Amphlett, the usher, denounced as a thief, had been committed for trial, and was now in the Westminster Bridewell.

"They *hang* thieves, don't they?" Eddie had cried, in his terror and pity. "Oh, why did Mr. Dubourg say that Mr. Amphlett had taken the money?"

Frances Dubourg sighed. "Oh, Eddie, I feel as badly about it as you, my poor child! But—but—who else could have taken it?"

"But they *found* it! They *found* the money!" Eddie screamed. "He *didn't* take it! It *wasn't* in his pocket! I *know* he didn't take it!"

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"They didn't find it on his person, no," said Mrs. Dubourg gently, "but, Eddie dear, they did find it where poor Mr. Amphlett had hidden it—it is supposed, so that he could come back and collect it later."

"It's a lie!" said Eddie fiercely. "Mr. Dubourg hates poor Mr. Amphlett, and I *bet* Mr. Dubourg knows that Mr. Amphlett didn't take my money!"

"Eddie! Eddie child! You simply must not say such things about Mr. Dubourg—or, indeed, about anyone to whom you owe duty and respect and affection. Mr. Dubourg is my husband, Eddie, and I simply will not tolerate such remarks, even though I love you very dearly, as you know! Now, will you be a good boy and say you are sorry for having said such a wicked thing?"

"No!" said Eddie, brushing his dark curls back from a tear-stained face. "No, I won't! I don't believe that Mr. Amphlett took the money, and if Mr. Amphlett hangs, they— Well, if he hangs, then I shall hate all of you! But I'll hate Mr. Dubourg most of all!"

Frances Dubourg took her arm from around the small boy's shoulder. Had she permitted herself to confide in him, he might have been agreeably surprised to hear her confess that her views were very similar to his. But she had her duty to perform—and Eddie was wilful enough as it was without her making matters worse by encouraging his tantrums.

"Very well then, Eddie," she said quietly, "if you must persist in being forward and insolent, you must be punished. Go up to your bedroom, sir, and stay there until you see fit to ask the pardon of Mr. Dubourg and myself. Go, Eddie. You have been a very bad boy—and you have hurt me exceedingly."

Eddie, as he gazed out of the window in the small dormitory which had now become his "punishment cell," was in no mood to be comforted. Had he been disposed to take a more cheerful view of matters, he might have reflected that, though pa, ma, Aunt Nancy, and the maid, Phoebe, were in distant Cheltenham, London was not entirely empty of friends, or even of relatives. Indeed, had not the fearful doom of poor Mr. Amphlett weighed so heavily on his spirit, Eddie might well have taken comfort in the thought that there were many ready to stand to him *in loco parentum*.

As the tears dried, and his sight became less blurred, Eddie found that he was looking once more at his favourite view: the artfully contrived ruins in the gardens of Mr. Holland's house, The Pavilion.

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The ruins, so Mrs. Dubourg had told him, were those of a palace of Cardinal Wolsey, that that ambitious and self-indulgent prelate had had built for himself at Esher. Half demolished at the fall of the Cardinal, the remains had mouldered through the centuries until Mr. Holland, seeking a romantic embellishment for his carefully landscaped gardens, had removed the ruins from Esher and caused them to be re-erected in full view of the Dubourgs' uppermost windows.

In a typical childish fashion, Eddie had confused the words "Esher" and "usher," so that he could never look through the window at the ruins of the palace of Esher without finding himself thinking of Mr. Amphlett, the usher. Now, to-day, there was an added reason why the sight of the ruins should remind him of the tragic event which had overtaken the shy, kindly assistant master. "Fallen into irretrievable ruin!" was how Mr. John Dubourg, nominal owner and actual disciplinarian of the Sloane-street school, had sententiously moralized on the fate which had befallen Joshua Amphlett. And once again, the idea of Mr. Amphlett and of the decaying palace of Esher became confused in Eddie's mind.

It was in order, so Mr. Dubourg said, to impress upon Eddie's mind the "awful character" of the usher's downfall that Eddie's evidence had been given in person, and not—as might easily have been arranged—by sworn deposition. Sick with the horror of a tragedy only half comprehended, the child, dressed in black as for a funeral, and with a scarf of black crape tied around his hat, had sat trembling whilst the hired four-wheeler had made its easy way down Sloane-street and along Knightsbridge to the toll-gate at Hyde Park-corner, and so along Piccadilly, down Haymarket, and along the Strand to the Police-court at Bow-street, where Amphlett was to be charged.

"How say you, Joshua Amphlett?" said the Clerk of Arraigns to the accused: "Do you plead Guilty or Not Guilty?"

"I plead Not Guilty," said the wretched usher; and, having said that, he spoke no more, for, in those days, no accused was permitted to give evidence in his own behalf. It was left to others to denounce and to defend him—if they might.

Joshua Farringdon Mylchrest Amphlett, usher, seventeen years, of 146, Sloane-street, Chelsea, had been charged that, on 22nd June 1817, he had maliciously, feloniously, and of malice aforethought, taken with intent to commit theft and robbery, three seven-shilling pieces, the property of one Edgar Poe, *alias* Edgar Allan, an infant,

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against the Peace of Our Sovereign Lord the King, His Crown and Dignity.

It was a bad time for thieves. A twenty-year war with France had ended only a twelvemonth before the ending of a three-year war with the formed American colonies. There was widespread unemployment. There were riots against the introduction of the machinery which promised even more unemployment. The dragoons had been called out against the mob of rioting artisans and farm-labourers. More, the revolt of the American colonies had removed a less grisly alternative to the hanging of convicted felons—for the Australasian penal colonies had not yet been organized as a replacement of the lost lands of America. A steady trend towards mercy had marked British penology since *la peine forte et dure* for prisoners mute of malice and burning at the stake for widows convicted of the "petty treason" of husband killing had been abolished in 1776. Now, with Government assailed on all sides, it was in no mood to temper justice with mercy. The trend towards leniency had been suddenly and violently reversed. Crime after crime had once again been made "capital," until now, in this year of 1817, a theft of goods or money over one shilling in value could merit the death penalty. As Joshua Amphlett stood charged, he had committed the crime of grand larceny for having stolen coins of the realm to the value of one guinea. Things, as Mr. Dubourg observed to the stricken Eddie, looked remarkably bad for "our" Mr. Amphlett.

The evidence was simple, and quickly given. The three gold seven-shilling pieces, the subject of the charge, had been in the skirt pocket of Master Allan's greatcoat, where he had put them on receiving them as a tip from his greatuncle, Mr. Samuel Arnold, the well known theatrical capitalist, director of both Drury-lane Theatre and the London Opera House, "a gentleman," Crown counsel permitted himself to observe, "who must be known to Your Worship?" ("Naturally, naturally," said the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, glancing with a new interest at the little American boy, related to one of the richest men in London. His heir, perhaps?)

On the day on which young Master Allan—Master Poe, that is to say, though he now bore the name of the American gentleman who had so kindly adopted him—on the day, then, that Master Allan saw his greatuncle, at the latter's house in Grosvenor-square, the day, despite the month, had been inclement, and the lad had worn his greatcoat. The tip had been handed to him by Mr. Arnold as the

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boy was leaving, and he had put the coins in the skirt-pocket of the coat. He had gone from Grosvenor-square to Sloane-street in a carriage belonging to Mr. Arnold, but though only a few paces had to be traversed between carriage and front door, the rain had been falling so heavily that the lad got quite soaked. His coat was taken from him and hung up in a closet beneath the stairs.

He had not had occasion to go to it until late that day, when he found, to his dismay, that the coins were no longer there. He had been under the impression that they might have dropped out whilst on his way back to the school in Mr. Arnold's carriage, but—as His Worship would hear—Mr. Dubourg had seen the usher come in from the back garden, and pass (it could confidently be presumed) through the hall. Suspecting the usher of having taken the coins, Mr. Dubourg, owner of the school in which young Master Allan was a pupil, had challenged the accused, and had ordered him to turn out his pockets. As His Worship would hear, the coins were not found on the person of the accused, and this might have afforded a strong presumption of innocence had not Mr. Dubourg bethought himself to look in a kit which hung on the wall of the parlour in which parents and others were seen by the school's proprietor.

"A kit?" The Chief Magistrate knitted his formidable brows. "Do you mean the small fiddle that dancing-masters use—or formerly used?"

"Your Worship is perfectly right," said Crown counsel obsequiously. "A kit is, as Your Worship justly observes, a small fiddle, hardly a foot long, used formerly by dancing-masters. The kit in question lies on a bracket made specially for it, and set high on the wall, so that small lads shall not be tempted to tamper with it. In this case, Your Worship, it plays, as we see, an important part. But, indeed, this small musical instrument is well known in Sloane-street—I should say, rather, to all who have occasion to visit No. 146, in that select thoroughfare."

"How so, Mr. Bassett?"

"Because, Your Worship, it was the kit formerly used by the most famous dancing-master of the century before last and of the beginning of the last. I refer, of course, to the famous Monsieur Isaac, of whom one may read in Evelyn's *Diary,* where he is mentioned because he taught Evelyn's daughter to dance."

"Just so, Mr. Bassett. But what, pray, has this to do with our case here?"

"It has to do with our case, Your Worship, because Monsieur Isaac

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was the great-grandfather of Mr. John Dubourg, and this kit very properly occupies a place of prominent display in the parlour at No. 146, Sloane-street. I mention this because few, if any, people who enter the house do not have their attention called to this interesting curiosity. I urge Your Worship to note that the kit could not but have been a matter of common knowledge to the accused, who had often had legitimate cause to visit the parlour, and there discuss matters arising out of his magisterial duties—either with Mrs. Dubourg, who has the more immediate care of the young scholars, or with Mr. Dubourg. It would have taken but a second for the accused to have slipped the three small gold coins into the kit by one of the holes in the upper surface; one of the 'f-holes,' as they are called—so I am instructed.

"Mr. Dubourg bethought himself to find a hiding place into which the accused could have slipped the coins within a few moments of his having taken them from the pocket of Master Allan's greatcoat. He was minded to recall the kit. He took the small fiddle down, shook it, and—lo!—a rattling noise confirmed his judgment. There were the three small coins

"Mr. Dubourg, as we shall hear, challenged the accused, and his silence, to which we shall have the testimony of witnesses, sufficiently acknowledged his guilt."

"We shall hear the evidence in due course," said the Chief Magistrate, "but I may ask here: he said nothing?"

"Nothing at all, Your Worship."

"Very well, Mr. Bassett: let us hear your witnesses."

It was true that Joshua Amphlett had said nothing when Mr. Dubourg had charged him, but, though he lacked the words to explain all this, Eddie wondered how anyone could fail to see why poor Joshua *must* be tonguetied before the dominating Mr. Dubourg. Amphlett was a man of no height, no presence, no family, no means: how could he have been otherwise than cowed? Shame at his being charged with theft—and a paltry theft, at that!—combined with the ever-present fear of the bullying Mr. Dubourg to render Amphlett even more silent than his usual habit.

Unhappily aware of the large, complacent, selfish man at his side, Eddie wished to ask him to stand up and declare himself convinced of the usher's innocence. But that, Eddie reflected miserably, would be to ask Mr. Dubourg to admit himself wrong—and that would never do. All grown-up persons, Eddie knew, hated to be otherwise

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than right—but with Mr. Dubourg, pretending to manage and to own the school (when even the scullery-maids knew the truth and sneered at him behind his back), this desire to be right at all costs was a passion which often drove the man into a purple-faced passion. "Don't argue with *me,* sir!" he would shout to some trembling boy who had dared to suggest that Mr. Dubourg might not be altogether in the right of it.

With sick heart, Eddie saw the case draw to its terrible but foregone conclusion. Saw the dock-brief barrister throw his client's life away with a would-be clever but ill-advised attack on Mr. Dubourg. ("Isn't it a fact, sir, that it is your *wife,* and not your good self, who is the owner of the school in Sloane-street?") He had thought to throw some discredit upon Mr. Dubourg as principal witness for the prosecution, but instead had succeeded only in irritating the Chief Magistrate. Eddie felt rather than understood, that he was in some way responsible for the fact that his half hearted attack on Mr. Dubourg had angered the judge. Was it because the Magistrate knew Greatuncle Arnold and that the Magistrate was angry with poor Mr. Amphlett for having taken the money from Greatuncle Arnold's nephew?

This made Eddie feel more desperately sad than ever, and in the realization that the great, red-faced man at his side could never be moved to be merciful towards poor Amphlett, Eddie sprang up, and in his childish treble shouted:

"You're all wrong! You're *wrong,* I say! I know that Mr. Amphlett didn't take my seven-shilling pieces! He couldn't! He *isn't* a thief—he isn't! Why don't you let him go?"

Half angrily, half pleadingly, Mr. Dubourg was hushing him, but Eddie continued to cry out in Amphlett's defence, until the Magistrate, though in a kindly way, said: "Someone really must quieten the lad—or take him outside. I commend his warm heart, but I cannot permit this disturbance in court."

Then, later, Eddie had given his evidence—which wasn't much, seeing that all he could say was that Greatuncle Arnold had given him the money—and everyone knew that already. Then, in a sick horror, he heard the Magistrate commit Amphlett for trial at Westminster Hall.

"And that's goodbye to *him!*" a man murmured at the back.

"They *hang* thieves, don't they?" Eddie whispered angrily to Mr. Dubourg. "Why did you make them *hang* him? I *hate* you!" said Eddie . . .

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Now here was Eddie, staring tearfully through the window, as he held aside the white dimity blinds. He was recalling, with a mounting sense of guilt, the unhappy journey with Mr. Dubourg back from Bow-street Magistrate's Court.

Aware that he was indulged more than any other boy, and, despite his tender years, half aware of the cause of his being so pampered, Eddie, childlike, sought to take every advantage of his fortunate position. He was aware that Mr. Dubourg greatly resented his insolence, but he was also aware that there were powerful reasons why Mr. Dubourg did not permit himself the rebukes that another boy, perhaps only half as insolent, would have merited—and got.

As their carriage came out of King-street into Whitehall, Eddie said, staring through the window at the Horse Guards: "Well—perhaps Mr. Amphlett did take the money."

"Ah, that's better!" said Mr. Dubourg, venturing to place a patronizingly approving hand on the child's dark hair. "That's more like it! Now we're beginning to see some *sense* instead of a lot of *non*-sense! Good, Eddie! Good!"

"Yes. But what I don't quite understand is how you knew he took it? The money, I mean, sir."

"Of course you mean the money. What else? But, come now, you heard me give my evidence surely? Why, you must have heard His Worship felicitate me on the clarity and succinctness with which I gave my unhappy testimony? Poor lad!—had only I not been forced by my oath to bear such grievous testimony against him!"

"You don't like him," said Eddie bluntly, not turning from the window.

"My feelings have nothing to do with it," said Mr. Dubourg stiffly.

"But you don't, though. He's told me so, and so have plenty of other people."

"You shouldn't listen to tittle-tattle. It ill becomes a well bred person, such as I trust that you will grow up to be, to listen to such stuff. By 'other people,' I presume, sir, you intend the domestics? Very well, I shall look into this!"

"Still, you don't like him," said Eddie, unabashed. Then: "My eye, what a swell that soldier is! Is he an officer, sir?"

"Eddie, your pa does not pay your fees that you may talk like some blackguard from St. Giles! Watch your mouth, sir! Yes, that elegant gentleman is not only an officer—there, raise your hat, Eddie: he is saluting us. I give you good-day, sir! He is not only an officer—see how splendidly he rides that fine chestnut!—he is also

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the Honourable Hampden Symes, my lord Denton's second son. But you were saying—?"

"I want to know how you knew that *Mr. Amphlett* took the money."

Mr. Dubourg sighed—a much-abused man, calling on his patience to help him bear a heavy load.

"I see that I shall get no peace until I repeat myself. Well, then, sir, as I told His Worship, I was standing on the landing halfway up the first pair of stairs—idly, as one may do, merely staring out of the window. I chanced to glance in a downwards direction and I noticed that young Amphlett was walking through the garden and coming towards the house—towards the back-door, to be precise."

"What was he doing?" Eddie asked in the same almost careless tone.

"What was he doing? Why, nothing. I assumed, if I gave it a thought, that he had been out to see the alterations that we are making in the back garden. By the way, all you lads should have a much more enjoyable playground as soon as the workmen shall have done."

"It was raining that day," said Eddie. "Hard."

"Was it? Well, yes, now that you come to mention it, it was."

"Cats and dogs. Was Mr. Amphlett wet?"

"If the rain was as heavy as all that, I suppose that he was. But we had all been discussing the alterations to the back garden. I guess that he was interested to see them, despite the rain."

"Then you heard the back door open, and then what? Mr. Amphlett says that he didn't come into the house more than enough to open the door under the stairs and go down into the scullery. Why do you think he didn't go down into the scullery? If I got wet, wearing my greatcoat, why shouldn't Mr. Amphlett have gotten wet, wearing nothing in the way of a greatcoat? I would have gone down to the scullery to get dry, I can tell you! What makes you think that *he* didn't?"

"Because I'm sure that I heard him go along the hall, in the direction of the parlour."

"Did you see him do so?"

"No, Eddie, as you heard me tell the Magistrate: I did not."

"But you can see all along the hall, right to the front door, from the first landing."

"You can, indeed. But, as it happens I was looking out at the back, not along the hall."

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"Then you heard him come back again, and then go down the stairs to the scullery."

"To the very best of my recollection," said Mr. Dubourg pompously. "Yes, I *am* sure that I heard him walk in the direction of the parlour, and walk back towards the stairs which lead down to the scullery. Had I seen him, I would have said so. As I did not see him, I equally well said so. But I see that you are about to ask what caused me to suspect that he was up to no good? Very well, Eddie, I shall explain.

"You will be pleased to recall that you told me of your greatuncle's most generous gift of three seven-shilling pieces?"

"Well, I let you see them," said Eddie, in no very gracious fashion.

"So you did. Well, I suddenly remembered them, and wondered whether or not they should have been left in your coat-pocket, where I had seen you put them. And—I don't know—one receives as it were a sort of premonition. Well, to make the story brief, you looked in your coat and found to your dismay that the pieces were no longer there. I reflected on what I had heard from the landing and went hurriedly into the parlour."

"Why did you go into the parlour?"

"Because it was the only room open in the direction in which I thought I had heard footsteps proceeding. The door of the ground-floor schoolroom was, if you remember, locked, since the term had ended. Only the door of the parlour had been left unlocked. Where else could anyone have gone, Eddie?"

"And so you went into the parlour, and wondered where Mr. Amphlett could have hidden the money—"

"Yes, hidden it, Eddie, where he might easily and rapidly possess himself of it again. I looked around the room and noticed the kit that no one but Mrs. Dubourg or myself is ever permitted to touch. I reached down, shook it, and there, as you know, I found the money. At present, Eddie, the money is retained as an exhibit in witness against the accused, but it shall be returned to you as soon as this unhappy business is over."

"As soon as they hang Mr. Amphlett!" said Eddie uncompromisingly. "Shall you go to the Old Bailey, sir, to see poor Mr. Amphlett turned off?"

"Gracious, what a sad child it is! 'Turned off,' forsooth! In what den of Barbary have they corrupted this innocent child that his lips frame such deplorable vocables! If you must dwell on such horrors, Eddie, for the sake of our common mother tongue, use the proper

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words. Say 'hanged,' if you must, but *my* lips shall not besmirch themselves with the solecisms of St. Giles!"

"What you say, sir, is that *Mr. Amphlett* must have taken my money—must have put it into the kit—because no one else could have done so."

"Precisely, Edgar. There was no one else who had the opportunity at that time. It is sad—but, alas, the fact."

"Oh, look! Here's Carlton House. Are those the Prince's Guards, sir? My eye—I mean, gracious me—what a spanking uniform! Do you know what, sir?"

"No, Eddie. What?"

"I don't believe that Mr. Amphlett ever touched the kit."

No one spoke for the rest of the journey to Sloane-street.

Something worried Eddie—something that he should have seen and had not seen, something that he should have remembered and had not remembered. Only half conscious of the motive behind his action, he opened the door of the dormitory and walked along the landing to the window which overlooked the street and the marshy expanse of the Five Fields beyond—a waste on which cows grazed, which extended unbroken as far as the walls of Buckingham Palace. At this period, only the western side of Sloane-street had been built, but opposite to No. 146, on the extreme edge of the swampy meadows, was a lean-to shack of roughly planed timber, a three-sided shelter of which the open side faced the street.

Now Eddie remembered. On the day on which the rain had come, the chair-caner and his boy had been sitting on the edge of the kerb, with the six chairs from the parlour around them. But when Eddie had returned from seeing his greatuncle, he noticed that the chair-caner had moved all the chairs to within the shelter of the shed.

He turned away from the window and began to walk downstairs.

Frances Dubourg, who had heard his footsteps, was awaiting him in the ground-floor hall. She looked more unhappy than angry.

"Oh, Eddie," she reproached him. "And I thought you were a boy of honour."

"I am, ma'am, I hope," said the boy stiffly. "Will you please open the door of the schoolroom? Please—I implore you!"

Shaken by his urgency, Mrs. Dubourg took the key from her reticule and opened the door.

"What is it that you want, Eddie?"

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The boy shouted in a perfect fever of excitement: "The—where they measure us! Here, here! See, at the back of the door. They always measure our heights!"

Frances Dubourg stared at the pencil markings which had recorded the heights of her pupils since she opened the school in 1811.

"I see them, Eddie, yes. But—but what about them?"

"Here's mine, look! See, I'm standing here, and—oh, please help me, ma'am, please help me!"

"Of course I shall, my darling! But how may I help you? Only tell me, that's all!"

"Can you see Mr. Amphlett's? For fun, Smith Major measured him only a week or so ago. There, please look! Can you see Mr. Amphlett's name? Yes, you can, can't you? Well, is it so very much above mine? I know that I'm only a little boy—but is Mr. Amphlett so very much bigger than I?"

"Now that you point it out to me, Eddie, it's quite astonishing—he cannot be more than six inches taller. I had always seen that he was short of stature, but I had not realized until now how singularly short he was!"

"Now come into the parlour, please!" And taking her hand, Eddie tugged his "other mother" impatiently out of the schoolroom into the parlour. "There! The kit! Do you see it?"

"I see it, Eddie. But what else should I see?"

"If I were six inches taller," said Eddie breathlessly, "could I reach it?"

"No," said Frances Dubourg slowly. "No, I don't see how you could. Not, that is to say, without standing on a chair."

"Which chair?" said Eddie, dancing up and down in his excitement.

"*Which* chair? Well, any chair that you chose, I imagine."

"There are only two sorts of chair here," said Eddie, "the six cane-bottomed chairs, and the ones covered with silk."

"Yes. Eddie, what *is* this? What, child, are you trying to say?"

Eddie was now almost weeping in his excitement. She put out her arms to him, but he fended her off, desperate to make her see the truth which was almost dazzling him.

"No! I mean, Mr. Amphlett couldn't have used one of the cane-bottomed chairs, because on that day they were all being re-caned. The man didn't finish until long after Mr. Amphlett had been arrested."

It was very quiet in the room. Even the woman's breathing seemed to have stopped as she pressed two splayed hands against her tu-

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multuous heart. She whispered: "Then—then he must have stood on one of the satin-covered chairs." But the boy took comfort in the knowledge that she was talking now only for the sake of talking, and to protect the pardonable lie of her marriage, and the unpardonable lie of the man they both feared. "He could have stood on one of those—"

"He'd just come straight from the garden, Mr. Dubourg said. His boots would have been all covered with clay."

"He might have slipped them off—"

"There wasn't time to. Mr. Dubourg said so. He said Mr. Amphlett came in from the garden and went straight to the parlour. Well, ma'am, if he *did* go straight through, he didn't change his boots. But he didn't stand on a silk-covered chair, because his boots were dirty, and there isn't a mark. And if he didn't stand on a chair, he couldn't have reached the kit, could he?"

"No, Eddie," said Frances Dubourg, the tears shining in her lovely eyes, "he couldn't."

"So I thought," said Eddie, putting his arms around her and gazing up at her, "if we were to order a cab and were to drive to Millbank—to the Bridewell—you could explain to the men there—and Mr. Amphlett could come home with us. He'd like that, don't you think?—and I don't suppose he's feeling very happy."

"I think that what would be a much more sensible plan would be to get Mr. Arnold to handle all the negotiations. Your greatuncle is a gentleman of considerable importance in London. They will listen to him far more readily. Get your hat and gloves, Eddie, whilst I make myself ready."

"I wonder who *did* put the money into the kit?"

"Someone tall enough to reach it without using a chair," said the woman, without thinking. Then she realized what she had said—and realized that the little boy was aware of what she was thinking.

"Thank you for believing me," Eddie said shyly.

"Bless you, Eddie, for trusting me. But to think of it—why, goodness gracious me. I wonder what on earth kind of man you'll be, Eddie, when you grow up!"

"Q"

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Wistar Kemp joined Miss Markham at the window. He was in control, but there were dark circles under his eyes. "Listening to the school troubadour . . . ?"

THE ACCUSATION

by CLEMENTS JORDAN

Miss Markham sat checking English quizzes and eating a cottage-cheese salad she had brought from home rather than brave the bedlam of the school cafeteria. When she retired two years ago, she had sworn she would not substitute, but the annual virus epidemic, which attacked students and teachers alike, gave her an excuse to change her mind. Her real reason, however, was that she wanted to help someone she was fond of. She didn't know in the least how she could do it but felt that she should face the problem at its place of origin.

A few days ago, Wistar Kemp had called on her. She had been shocked at the haggard face and beaten appearance of the young chemistry teacher. He shook as she helped him off with his overcoat and supported him to the couch with a motherly arm about his waist. She had poured him a half cup of hot coffee, knowing that he could not handle a full cup.

He gulped it for the medicine it was and managed to stutter out that a girl student had gone to the principal and accused him of making sexual advances to her.

Miss Markham was stunned—the most serious charge that could be brought against any teacher! She looked at Wistar's boy-next-door face with its pug nose and wide mouth made for friendly smiles and wondered how the principal could believe such an accusation. She poured more coffee, this time a full cup, and added three spoons of sugar. He put both hands around it as if to absorb its warmth. She knew it was from more than the January cold—it was the chill of despair.

"Tell me," Miss Markham ordered, in the voice that had gotten positive results from students for more than forty years.

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"I don't know much," he said. "Mr. Bradley called me into his office today after school and told me one of my students had reported that she came to me for help after school and that I—*touched* her."

"Who was the girl?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He said it would place an unfair burden on her if I knew. I won't be suspended until after the hearing in two weeks. How could anybody think I could do something like that?" He said "that" as if it were an obscenity.

"Is there any student who has a grudge against you?"

Wistar thought. "No," he said at last, "I don't think so. My poorest students know I'm fair. They know I'm always willing to help whoever needs me."

Miss Markham herself knew this was true. She had known Wistar all his life. He had run errands for her and mowed her lawn. She had taught him and, so he had claimed, inspired him to become a teacher. They had been colleagues for three years and she knew he was a dedicated teacher. But with this blot on his record, he might never teach again.

She had taught Price Bradley, too, and knew he was an honorable, caring man. But whatever his concern for Wistar, an abused student must come first with any principal. Why couldn't the charge against Wistar be theft or murder? Detectives might have fingerprints or bullets to trace—and suspects. This was like fighting fog.

She was glad to learn that his wife Sue and the baby were away, staying with her mother, another flu victim. She made him promise to eat dinner with her every night in the hope of browbeating him into eating at least one decent meal a day. Then she called the school and put her name on the substitute list. This was her third day on her old English hall and she had to admit she was no wiser than she had been the first day.

Strains of a song came from the students' smoking area below her window—a song so familiar that once Miss Markham had declared she might slash her wrists if she heard it one more time. She got up and peered out of the window. Yes, there he was—Perry Toler. Wasn't he supposed to have graduated last year?

Perry had been in her American literature class and seldom had she had a more difficult student. Not only had he been uninterested in the printed word and done little work, but he had thought he could talk her into better grades than he earned. His clinching argument was always, "What good is this stuff anyway?"

A showdown of sorts had occurred in the spring when they were

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studying poetry. When required to write a poem, Perry had protested loudly that he was no sissy. When told he would have to try, he had left class, muttering sullenly about all teachers being alike, always bugging him about useless stuff. But then he had submitted an excellent poem and Miss Markham had asked him to remain after class.

"About your poem, Perry—"

"You liked it, huh?"

"*Very* much. I have to compliment you on your taste." His pleased smirk vanished as she added, "Too bad you didn't write it."

"What d'you mean?" he blustered.

"Please, Perry. I've read poetry too long not to recognize William Blake. Look, you're studying guitar, aren't you? Why don't you write something simple, lyrics you could accompany on the guitar perhaps? I'll give you another few days, but I want this next poem to be written by *you.*"

A few days later he had proudly handed her the doggerel that was so thoroughly to try her: "Oh, her name it was Anne/ I guess it was God's plan/ She went to her death one sad day/ Now they sigh and they cry/ As they bid her goodbye/ 'Cause the angels called her away."

"I'm sure it's your work this time, Perry, but the first two lines don't scan."

"You said the important thing was the *thought,*" he countered. "Not the mechanical things!"

"Yes, thought is more important than mechanics. But you've chosen a ballad type poem, which must rhyme and scan. You remember how I taught you to count stressed syllables? Maybe you could try another name. You need a two-syllable name."

But Perry's girl's name was Anne, he protested—and he wasn't about to make her sore by changing it.

"Does she have a middle name?"

"It's Sarah. Nothing rhymes with that."

"Think about it some more and see what you can do," Miss Markham had urged.

Two days later he swaggered into class and gave her a paper. "I found out Sadie's a nickname for Sarah," he said and Miss Markham saw that the first two lines now read, "Oh, her name it was Sadie/ A fair little lady." She praised his ingenuity and told him the verse was now acceptable.

Later when she read the best poems she had received aloud, she had not included his and he rose to his feet, demanding why. Thus

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prompted, she read it to the class and was astonished at its reception. Students who had written far better poems looked at Perry with new respect.

The next day he brought his guitar to class and announced that he had put his lyrics to music, and proceeding to chord his guitar in a semblance of a tune he told them it was dedicated to "the girl of his heart."

From then on, he brought his guitar to school every day and could be heard in the glassed-in smoking area down across the way serenading his lady (presumably Sadie) who sat snuggled at his side, the students gathered around him listening as raptly as if they had not heard it before.

Then one day Miss Markham noticed a difference. Now the first lines were, "Oh, her name it was Sherry/ As sweet as a berry." A few weeks later Perry changed ladies again. This time the song began, "Oh, her name it was Tricia/ I'm sure gonna miss her." But though the names were different, Miss Markham observed that the girls themselves looked remarkably the same—flat of face but not of figure. She thought it might be true that a man loved only once—all others were merely copies.

As the changing versions of the same doleful song continued to float up to her window, it had occurred to Miss Markham that she might have to resort to something desperate, like eating in the school cafeteria. But summer came at last and with it her retirement, and one of the chief pleasures she took for the first weeks was the absence of that twanging guitar and the adenoidal eulogies of Perry to his girl friends. Now, back at her old desk, its persistence jarred her.

The youngsters' taste for songs about divorce, erring wives, and straying husbands surprised her, but surely this was morbid. She went to the window. Sure enough, there was Perry, starting at the top, "Oh, her name it was Pearlie/ A sweet little girlie." The girl looked vaguely familiar, but Miss Markham didn't remember a student named Pearl. She seemed a bit plainer than Perry's usual type.

Her door opened and Wistar Kemp joined her at the window. He was in control, but there were dark circles under his eyes and he looked a good ten years older. "Listening to the school troubadour?"

"Yes." She sighed and explained how his song had come into being. "I feel responsible," she laughed.

"Well, this new girl is a surprise to me," Wistar said. "Ruby Nowlin is the brain of my Chemistry IV class. Perry flunked it last year and could this time, too. I told him so last week and bawled him out for

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wasting his time and mine. What she sees in him—" He shook his head.

Ruby, Miss Markham thought, not Pearl. But then Perry had adapted names to achieve a rhyme before.

"I wonder how he got hold of that guitar," Wistar mused. Miss Markham looked at him questioningly. "He nearly knocked me down in the hall last week because I wouldn't let him get it out of his locker during lunch. This is my month on hall duty," he added.

Miss Markham remembered the unpopular duty well. It was thought that if students were barred from using their lockers as storage places it might lessen the drug problem prevalent in the school. Consequently, the teachers took turns patrolling the halls and supervising restrooms at lunchtime. Students were confined to the cafeteria and the smoking area on the theory that they would have less freedom to make deals.

"I was determined he wouldn't get past me," Wistar said. "I locked the door down at one end of the hall because it's impossible to see around the corner to the stairs there. He got that guitar today, though. I'm going to check into that."

The bell rang and classes started. Between adverbial clauses and Poe's stories, the name Ruby tugged at Miss Markham's memory. She was not one of those old timers who claimed to remember every pupil he or she had ever had, but Ruby was a senior, which meant she could well have been a student of hers before she retired. And there was something about Ruby that tugged at Miss Markham's memory.

It came to her in the night. She had been dreaming, but sat up in bed wide awake. Ruby had not been her pupil. Miss Markham had heard about her through another teacher. There had been a rash of thefts around the location of the girls' gym—a sweater, jewelry, lunch money. They had narrowed the thefts down to one daily, fifty-minute period, and finally to Ruby. The guidance counselor had called in her parents, who admitted that Ruby had had a record of kleptomania in the school in another state from which they had moved. Her stepfather virtuously said that he had done his best to beat it out of her. Horrified, the counselor had managed to persuade him to get psychiatric treatment for Ruby and had advised her teachers to be gentle with her. Later Ruby was allowed to live with a loving aunt. She had stolen nothing else.

But Ruby, Miss Markham now was thinking, though a brilliant student, might still be hungry for love. What might she do to get

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it? Was Perry really attracted to her? If not, would he pretend to be? Did he feel hostile toward Wistar for another reason than poor grades? Miss Markham lay back down on her pillow but spent the rest of the night with her thoughts.

She phoned Price Bradley early the next morning and was granted the interview she requested a half hour before classes began.

"First," she said after he had greeted her and they were sitting, "please tell me if the girl who accused Wistar is Ruby Nowlin. If not, you don't have to tell me who did." But Price Bradley's face had already told her and so she went on to describe all she had imagined and guessed.

As she had thought, he was as concerned for Wistar as she was but had to protect the student. He hoped there was merit in her deductions and promised to test a plan she proposed to him.

During the period before lunch, it was announced over the intercom that there was to be a fire drill. Students were to vacate their classes and proceed in an orderly way to their regular stations, not attempting to take any books or other possessions.

The janitors had been told to search all lockers, beginning with one on the hall nearest the smoking area. The search was short-lived. Miss Markham had guessed correctly. It was Ruby Nowlin's locker and in it was Perry Toler's guitar. Taped within its dark recesses were small packets of heroin, easily obtainable by loosening a couple of strings, which he might do on pretense of tuning his instrument. Ruby and Perry were sent for and Wistar Kemp's world was given back to him.

When, with shining eyes and restored youth, he asked Miss Markham how she had figured it out, she said that Perry's reaction to being barred from the hall had been the first clue. It had seemed to her a more likely reason for his hostility than being warned of flunking—after all, he must be used to that from all his teachers. It was only a few days after the hall incident that Ruby had gone to the principal with a ploy to get rid of the teacher. "You see, Perry had a golden opportunity to distribute heroin during lunch in one of the few places where students are allowed to congregate and any day he couldn't get to the guitar was costing him a great deal."

The teachers looked gravely at each other. "What made you suspect Ruby?"

"She needed love so much it made her vulnerable enough," Miss Markham said. It was as simple and as sad as that.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

PARKER ON PRIVATE EYES: Lord John Press (19073 Los Alimos Street, Northridge, CA 91326) has just published a handsome hardcover edition of Robert B. Parker's *The Private Eye in Hammett and Chandler.* Parker describes the 63-page book as "the remnant of my doctoral dissertation," and it contains some interesting comments on the violent hero in American literature, tracing his roots back to James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and recording his progress across the country, through the Western heroes to the California private eyes of Hammett and Chandler. The edition is limited to three hundred copies, numbered and signed by Parker, priced at $50.00 each.

Speaking of Robert B. Parker, his Spenser novels are so popular in Japan that a men's cosmetics firm in Tokyo has issued a pamphlet called *Spenser's Tactics* to tie in with its "Tactics" line of men's products.

STRANGE DAYS: Volume Two of Robert Sampson's *Yesterday's Faces,* a continuing study of series characters in the early pulp magazines, has just been published by Bowling Green University Popular Press (Bowling Green, OH 43403). Titled *Strange Days* and priced at $24.95 hardcover and $12.95 paperbound, it features scientific detectives (Dr. Thorndyke, Craig Kennedy, Luther Trant, etc.), occult investigators, jungle men, and interplanetary adventurers in the pulps from 1907 to 1939. One of the best sections deals with Seabury Quinn's popular occult sleuth, Jules de Grandin. Complete checklists of the series are included in the back of the book.

Yesterday's Faces, with two volumes still to come, is shaping up as a valuable reference work for students of the early pulps.

NERO WOLFE ANNIVERSARY: October 24, 1984 marks the 50th Anniversary of the publication of *Fer-de-Lance,* Rex Stout's first book about Nero Wolfe. The event will be marked by several small dinner parties around the country, organized by The Wolfe Pack (PO Box 822, Ansonia Station, New York, NY 10023), the

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official Nero Wolfe fan organization. And while you're waiting for the celebration to begin, here's a bit of trivia. What were the first words uttered by Nero Wolfe on page one of *Fer-de-Lance?* The answer, which would make a great lapel button for Wolfe fans, is "Where's the beer?"

MIDNIGHT READING: Sure to be the high point of every mystery aficionado's reading next spring is *1001 Midnights,* a guide to 1001 mystery novels and short-story collections, written by Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller with the help of some well known writers and fans. A big book in every sense, it'll be published by Arbor House in March or April.

Also coming next spring is a new anthology, *The Ethnic Detectives,* edited by Pronzini and Muller. Dodd, Mead is the publisher.

WINE AND CRIME: An interesting theme for a mystery anthology is contained in *Through a Glass, Darkly: 13 Tales of Wine and Crime,* edited by Barry Woelfel with an Introduction by Terry Robards (Beaufort Books, $16.95). Though the book recalls Clifton Fadiman's 1962 anthology *Dionysus: A Case of Vintage Tales About Wine* and includes three of the same stories (E. C. Bentley's "The Unknown Peer," Roald Dahl's "Taste," and Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"), it also has nice entries by Stanley Ellin, Barry Perowne, Bill Pronzini, Arthur C. Clarke, Michael Gilbert, and others.

MYSTERY MAKERS: The success of the Anthony Boucher and Christianna Brand collections published last year by Southern Illinois University Press has prompted the press to continue its Mystery Makers series under the editorship of Francis M. Nevins, Jr. and Martin H. Greenberg. Coming next spring will be the third volume in the series, *Carnival of Crime: Best Mystery Short Stories of Fredric Brown.*

SEQUEL: At age 82, author Curt Siodmak is working on a novel titled *I, Gabriel,* described as a sequel to his well known 1943 mystery-fantasy, *Donovan's Brain.*

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Ruth Rendell follows up *The Killing Doll,* her first Book-of-the-Month Club main selection, with an even more unusual novel, *The Tree of Hands.* It's due from Hutchinson (London) in October and will be published here by Pantheon early next year.

Mary Higgins Clark's new novel *StillWatch,* a Literary Guild main selection, is due from Simon & Schuster in October.

Very Old Money, a new novel by Stanley Ellin, will be published by Arbor House early next year.

Next from Dick Francis is *Proof,* his twenty-second novel, due from Putnam also early in 1985.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The pages of the book riffle, and words cross the screen. *The impulse had become irresistible; there was only one answer to the fury that tortured him. And so he committed his first act of murder. He had broken the most deep-rooted taboo, and found not guilt nor anxiety or fear but freedom. Every humiliation which stood in his way could be swept aside by this simple act of annihilation: murder.*

So begins the newest screen thriller from the accomplished hand of Dario Argento, Italy's Hitchcockian master of suspense and terror. The film's name is *Tenebrae,* which is also the title (in the film) of a best-selling mystery novel—the opening passage is quoted above—written by a young American in Rome, Peter Neal. To his horror, the author is informed by a suave police detective (whose passion is Conan Doyle) that someone is choosing random victims—a shoplifter is the latest—upon whom to imitate the murders within the book. An epicene literary critic named Christiano Berti accuses Peter of having a disordered mind. Peter, for his part, is certain Christiano is linked somehow to the slayings, but wonders, too, if perhaps he *is* going mad. The twists and turns of a complex plot become bizarre and exquisitely weird.

His choice of title is a good indication of Argento's mystic reaches. *Tenebrae* has a variety of meanings, among them darkness and the three last and most sorrowful days of Lent. The American distributor is with callous wisdom changing the film's name to the peppier *Unsane.* The content, however, will still be unmistakably Argento.

The director, still in his thirties, had been a young arts critic for a firebrand Italian newspaper when he made his first film. *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) was a stunning debut, an international success, and an intricate mystery. It tells of an American writer living in Rome, strolling through a dark street, who is shocked to see a woman struggling with a menacing figure behind the wide glass façade of a modern art gallery. The woman is stabbed, but the writer manages to save her life. From that point on, though, he is the target of a maniac assailant. An old painting depicting a long-ago crime and a rare bird (in Rome's zoological garden) whose call resembles crystal shattering are clues to the surprising, complex solution to the plot.

Argento's next films were no less tricky. In *Cat o' Nine Tails* (1971) the murderer must be unmasked from among the staff and patients of a mental research laboratory. In *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1972), the title refers to the last image

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caught by the retina of a dead man. Argento's films are rich in strange images.

In *Deep Red* (1976), thought by many to be his best film, Argento sets up his cleverest whodunit for unraveling: a young American musician in Rome, pursuing a killer through an apartment filled with paintings in which a woman psychic has just been killed, thinks he sees something amiss. He spends the entire film trying to recall what has disturbed him, returning ultimately to the corridor of paintings for a heart-pounding finale. *Deep Red*— "Profundo Rosso" in Italian, although Argento shoots in English—was the first film to star his wife, Daria Nicolodi.

Suspiria, in 1977, a supernatural suspense drama set in an aristocratic boarding school, was his most commercial success all over the world. Alas, his next film, *Inferno* (1981), while wildly popu-

distribution problem, never released in the United States. It again uses a young musician as hero, stumbling upon two houses (one in Rome, the other in New York) with a terrifying secret: they are the homes of three ancient, mythic sisters—the mothers of sighs, tears, and darkness—who must feed on young lives. *Inferno* may yet ignite on American TV.

Right now Argento is filming outside Zürich in Switzerland, where a historic chateau doubles for a girls' school—a setting for certain bizarre occurrences. A fourteen-year-old American youngster *and a swarm of insects* must track down a hidden killer. The feature will be called *Phenomena,* and will certainly have the Dario Argento stamp: lushly photographed, richly atmospheric, deeply mystical, bone-chillingly suspenseful, and a heck of a good mystery show.

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Authors write under pseudonyms primarily for two reasons—to keep separate their different "voices," both within and across genres, and to enable them to publish more works than the constraints of a single byline might allow. Most of John Creasey's numerous pseudonyms were chosen for the second reason, while his "J. J. Marric" was selected to concentrate his police-procedural writing. Donald Westlake has used his crime-fiction bylines to isolate his distinctive voices: his own name for comic capers, Tucker Coe for ex-

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ploration of emotion (guilt), and Richard Stark for novels of professional crime.

Westlake's latest, *Levine* (Mysterious Press, $14.95), is much in the Tucker Coe mood though mostly antedating use of that pseudonym. Here are six novelets, five published in magazines 1959–1965, and the last written for this volume. All are about Abe Levine, a 53-year-old Brooklyn police detective who is pervaded by consciousness of his aging, beat-skipping heart, his mortality and that of those around him. His cases teach him about living and dying, about being a compassionate cop in a job of death. An admirable portrait.

Ingenious in conception and compelling in execution—that's *Winter Spy* (Macmillan, $13.95) by "Michael Hastings" (Michael Bar-Zohar). Who recruited and managed the famous Russian spies—Philby, Burgess, Maclean—in the British machinery? Hastings here proposes an answer: Alex Orloff, who himself defected to the West and has been living in the U.S. under an assumed identity for seventeen years. Now he agrees to reveal his role publicly, be interviewed on TV in London. Immediately men begin to die—men who had been exposed in the Seventies as spies for Russia, but men totally unknown to Orloff. Why? A policeman, a reporter, even Orloff are driven—to their great peril—to find the answer.

If Archie Bunker were a British policeman, he would be Superintendent Andrew Dalziel: crude and shrewd, opinionated and bigoted to the core, yet with a thread of sensitivity under it all. He and Inspector Pascoe return in *Deadheads* (Macmillan, $12.95) by Reginald Hill. Since Patrick Aldermann was eleven, people seem to have been dying around him to his considerable advantage. Now he's an official of a manufacturing firm, whose director comes to Dalziel and Pascoe with his faint suspicions that Aldermann has climbed to his present eminence over the corpses of two who stood in his way. Not much to go on; even the director shortly regrets his comments and begs the police off. But there *is* a sort of pattern over the years, and coppers once on the scent are not easily diverted. A captivating story, with characters sharply caught, with adroitly handled ambiguity.

A notable addition to the territory of the police procedural is Mark Hebden's series about Inspector Evariste Clovis Desire Pel, of which the fourth is *Pel and the Staghound* (Walker, $12.95). This is uncommonly rich in character, in diversity of investigations, in plotting and narrative. A businessman has vanished, to no one's particular sorrow. A mugger is loose in Pel's French city. The leader of one rival gang is dead; Pel thinks the leader of another is guilty, but the suspect has an excellent alibi—provided by Pel's men. And all the while Pel is experiencing the dual traumas of love and a promotion-in-grade of sorts. You'll like the complex Inspector and this excellent novel.

Gregory Mcdonald creates a fascinating closed setting in *Flynn's*

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In (Mysterious Press, $15.95). And he gives a gorgeous, witty view of Inspector Francis Xavier Flynn in the bargain. Late one night Flynn is called out of Boston, out of Massachusetts, to a *very* private hunting lodge where the Police Commissioner is a guest. And where a decidedly inconvenient corpse has turned up. This needs solving very quietly. Flynn's the man. But then comes another corpse. How long can murders be disguised as accidents while Flynn tries to figure out which of a dwindling list of nationally known figures is an industrious killer?

Jon L. Breen's second novel, *The Gathering Place* (Walker, $12.95), shows him growing nicely in mastery of the form. Rachel Hennings inherits her uncle's L.A. used-book store, for decades visited by writers famous and readers legion. Rachel has a curious psychic gift —automatic writing—and it seems to reveal that best-selling Arlen Kitchener used a hack ghostwriter to produce one of his early works.

Said ghost, in fact, is dead—murdered of late by hands unknown. And something worth killing for apparently still lies somewhere among the dusty tomes crowding the bookshop. This tale is delightfully replete with antiquarian book lore, and it's a good mystery to boot; perhaps the beginnings of a series?

Anne Morice's latest for actress-sleuth Tessa Crichton is *Murder Post-Dated* (St. Martin's, $10.95), a sprightly affair with much evidence of the author's fine ear for dialogue. When a lady goes missing Tessa naturally thinks murder. And when the lady's husband tells a fishy story about her absence, it seems Tessa might be right. Sundry intrigues by Tessa's country acquaintances add agreeable complexity, and she puts the pieces together.

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DETECTIVERSE

GONE TODAY, HERE TOMORROW

by LEO LAVIGNE

A million dollars in the bank,
That's why she ran away with Frank.
When the money was spent and gone,
That's when she returned to Ron.

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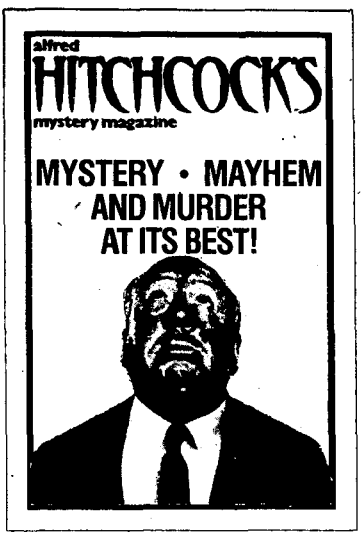
WATCH OUT!



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A *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"You want to be with your family in the old house, with mother and father, with big sister and little brother, before you all grew up and lost each other," Wargraves said.

"Oh, yes." Hagerty was aware of a heavy load falling away from him. When had he last felt so unchained? When he was twelve years old and the summer holidays were beginning and ahead lay two months of paradise. Ahead lay forever . . .

An odd and evocative, end-of-summer story about what is currently called midlife crisis . . .

THE BROKEN CONTRACT

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Don Hagerty stood waist-deep in the tepid water of Cedar Lake, avoiding the spray churned up by the kids he was teaching how to swim, balanced himself with toes squirming in the slimy bottom while he made plans to leave camp and catch the afternoon bus to Baytown. Not to Metralia, where his wife and son lived, but in the other direction entirely, back to his old home town. And why? Because he had failed to attend his sister's funeral, was that the reason? He hadn't known Eloise was gone until it was too late.

Hagerty believed there was no choice. He had to try going home because trouble would overtake him if he stayed here. Forty-one years old, he was respected by the kids in his classes at Metralia Collegiate and loved by his wife and son—and yet he felt there was an indefinable threat hanging over his life if he failed to make this move.

And there was the money. The money was like a special offer with

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a time limit on it. The fact of the money meant that getting up and going was now or never.

Hagerty had eleven hundred dollars hidden away in his cabin behind the dormitory where the kids slept. It was a colossal sum. He hadn't banked his latest check from the school. Nor had he told Liz about an unexpected rebate for half a tank of fuel oil following the conversion of their house to electric heating. He could go *now*. He could pay fares and hotel bills, pick up meal tabs, buy drinks into the foreseeable future.

"Okay, everybody out," Hagerty said. He braced his hands on the wooden pier and lifted himself out of the water, a sunburned, overweight, greying, powerful man. The kids clambered out and sported about his thighs, hoping for a cuff about the ear. "Dry and change and over to the pasture. Benson is going to try and teach you how to play baseball."

"Awwww." They hated Benson—he acted all grown-up and serious. "Take us for a hike, Donnie! Let's go, Donnie! Come on!"

"Another day." Hagerty's throat tried to close. He was abandoning these kids, running out. But he had to do it. "Go practice the double-play."

As for abandoning people, what about his wife and son? He had a marriage contract with Elizabeth over and above the prayer-book platitudes of the wedding service. Hagerty had never taken such promises lightly. But Liz was okay these days as far as money was concerned. He would write her a letter and advise her to tell their friends that he'd gone a little crazy in early middle-age. His disappearance would be a three-day wonder in Metralia, then life would go on. Liz had her job at the gallery. He was giving her one less breakfast to prepare—and fewer depressions to cope with.

As for young Pete, twenty-one years was no longer young. Peter Hagerty would be the first to advise his father to do what he had to do. At nineteen, Peter had taken a rucksack and a couple of hundred dollars and boarded a plane for India. For six months he had explored the subcontinent, living with a fisherman's family on a beach in Goa, taking it a day at a time, coming home lean and brown and calm.

Hagerty followed his gang up the slope. They defied gravity by tumbling and rolling all the way, wet brown bodies glistening in the sunlight. He let them go and turned aside onto the path of spongy pine needles leading to the cabin he shared with Benson, his fellow teacher and drinking companion. They had tied one on last April

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after Hagerty opened the letter from his brother Norman and out fell a clipping from an obituary column. The name was Hammond—Eloise must have married somebody near the end. His sister had become a loner, a part-time worker in hospitals and restaurants. Scraps of news filtered down from Toronto, one referring to an operation for cataracts. Now here was death so sudden he was afraid to consider the cause.

Hagerty wrote a note and left it on Benson's pillow. "Ben, old buddy, I've decided to skate out of here. Tell the management, please. They can bring in one of the lads from the unemployed to take over for me. When you see Liz, tell her I have no choice. I'll be writing her a letter that explains all, but she'll believe you. Sorry to leave you at the start of the summer—I owe you several beer evenings. As ever, your quondam partner in crime, Don."

With his spare clothing packed in a zippered bag and the wad of cash stuffed in a trouser pocket, Hagerty fled around the back of the staff cabins and down a hillside to the gravel road. A farmer in a pickup truck gave him a lift to the village. After he purchased his ticket across the counter of the general store, he began to feel safe. There was beer on sale from a cooler. He drank a tin and then another and experienced a rising of confidence.

He went to stand outside. The house in Baytown wouldn't be the same with Eloise gone. Norman wouldn't be there either. Hagerty's young brother was working in Montreal, writing advertising copy. His mother had been dead for eleven years, his father for three.

A bus rolled in, putting an end to his gloomy calculations. What the hell was he going back there for anyway?

Box-shaped, with small windows, the bus was of a type they stopped producing years ago. No other route but Metralia-Baytown with its peasant clientele would accept such an antiquated vehicle. It even had a giant spare tire mounted on the back, with the name of the company painted on it.

Hagerty climbed aboard and chose a seat. He stuffed his bag onto the overhead rack and shifted himself close to the window. It was late afternoon, still crystal-bright, with hot air rising in waves from the asphalt road.

The driver, turgid with self-assurance, eased himself onto his leather throne. He closed the door, using a handle connected to a complicated system of hinged shafts. The steering wheel pressed his stomach as he switched on and maneuvered his ship onto the river of concrete flowing west to Baytown . . .

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Hagerty became aware of a man pressed in beside him, tried to remember when he had sat down. They were shoulder to shoulder in the narrow seat, the newcomer inches taller, overdressed in a blue business suit, white shirt, and tie. Grey hair roosted above his ears like folded wings. There were plenty of empty seats, but Hagerty felt—it was not fear or shyness—disinclined to ask the stranger to move. "Afternoon," he said.

"G'day, g'day." The man sounded like a prosperous farmer. Welcome to the county fair and what time do they start the harness racing? "Hope you don't mind a little companionship. I find bus rides tedious and am forever seeking ways to pass the time." The pulpit voice hummed and the great head inclined above Hagerty like a bird deciding whether the object on the ground is food. His eyes were pale-green discs and they held Hagerty in hypnotic focus.

"I'm heading home," the runaway said without being asked. "Back to Baytown. Spend a few days in the old house." The bus picked up as much speed as was possible on the old highway with its bends and hills.

"My name is Wargraves," the stranger said. "I'd like you to call me Victor." He extended a hand across his chest. Hagerty identified himself and accepted the handshake. "I'm an entrepreneur," Wargraves went on. "I buy and sell for profit. I presume you are not opposed to people taking a profit." Thatched brows rose above the penetrating eyes.

"I'm a schoolteacher," Hagerty explained lamely.

"The profit motive is God's gift to the human race. The idea of trading for a profit has turned hostile tribes into cooperating nations. We can no longer kill that foreigner, however much instinct urges us to do it, because we hope to make money out of him."

Wargraves lectured his companion along these lines for some time, until the bus rolled into a town and stopped on half an acre of gravel beside a diner. The passengers climbed down and went inside to freshen up and have some food. Hagerty ordered a couple of beers and carried the glasses to a booth in a corner. Wargraves joined him and produced a chromium-plated flask from his hip pocket. "Drink some of your beer," he said, "and let me top you up." A sympathetic smile softened his features. "It's a long journey."

Hagerty drank and held out his glass with the level lowered. Wargraves decanted amber liquid that smelled like bourbon. Hagerty drank again. "My young brother introduced me to boilermak-

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ers," he said. "He's in Montreal now, the success of the family. Big man in advertising."

"Much maligned, the advertising profession."

Hagerty was fumbling in his wallet. "Here's Norman," he said, passing a snapshot across the table.

Wargraves studied the image of a young man relaxing against the fender of an open car. "Norman," he said.

"And here's my wife, Elizabeth."

"Very nice indeed."

"She's back in Metralia."

"Ah."

Hagerty took another drink. "She doesn't know I'm here."

"Doesn't she?"

"I'm supposed to be counseling boys at the YMCA camp on Cedar Lake. But I left without telling anybody. Took the money and ran."

"Whose money?"

"My own. I didn't rob anybody. Well, I suppose I'm taking from Liz, because everything I earn should be half hers. So half of the eleven hundred is stolen." Hagerty drank again.

"Why are you running away?"

"I'm leaving one family and going back to the other. But it's crazy, because there is no family to run back to. My parents have been gone for years, my big sister died three months ago, and my young brother is in Montreal. So there are no Hagertys in Baytown."

Wargraves nodded as he poured again from the flask into Hagerty's glass. "I'm going to reveal something to you," he said. "My name is not Wargraves. I assumed that name a hundred and fifty years ago." He settled back in the booth, but the green eyes maintained their connection across the table. "It seemed an appropriate name, because I was involved in the armaments trade at that time and my nature is not without its poetic side. Throughout history, I have been known by various names; it is important now that you understand with whom you are dealing. I am the Devil. I am Satan."

Hagerty accepted the revelation without question. He was immersed in the reassuring buzz of Wargraves' voice.

"You can understand," his companion went on, "that I am in a position to grant a favor, to make arrangements." He reached inside his jacket and produced pen and paper. "To write a contract."

Hagerty got to the point without difficulty. "Can I have anything I want?"

"You want to be with your family in the old house, with mother

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and father, with big sister and little brother, before you all grew up and lost each other."

"Oh, yes." Hagerty was aware of a heavy load falling away from him. When had he last felt so unchained? When he was twelve years old and the summer holidays were beginning and ahead lay two months of paradise. Ahead lay forever—

"All we have to do is get it down in black and white and sign it." The pen in Wargraves' fingers skimmed across the page silently but with a fine copper-plate flourish. When he was finished, he said: "Tell me what you think of this—

"I, Donald Hagerty," he read, "do hereby accept from Victor Wargraves the gift of one day in my old home, with myself twelve years old and everything else around me and all others as they were then, in exchange for which I promise to grant Victor Wargraves, when that day is over, full rights to my immortal soul."

Wargraves searched his client's eyes for disapproval. He extended the pen as he intoned the contract's final word: "Signed—"

Hagerty produced a query. "Do I get only one day?"

"One day is enough." Wargraves sounded impatient. "One day is forever."

"And when it's over?"

"Rest assured you will know that your soul belongs to me."

With the pen in his insensate grasp, Hagerty found it almost impossible to write his name. Wargraves' hand masked the page as an immaculate fingernail pointed to the space where Hagerty traced a shaky signature. Then the older man folded the paper, reached across the table, and stuffed it into Hagerty's inside pocket.

"When do I go to Baytown?" was Hagerty's final question.

"Whenever you're ready. Go now . . ."

Normie's head was on the pillow in the other bed. Chestnut hair curled above the blanket. The screen under the raised window was clogged with dust and held in its mesh the bodies of several trapped flies. Their presence caused Donnie some anxiety but the feeling passed as a cool breeze blew in, carrying the smell of apples from the tree behind the kitchen roof. He stretched and the bedsprings creaked. Normie shifted and his springs answered. The younger brother made mouth noises.

"You awake?" Donnie asked.

"Mmmm."

"Getting up?"

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"Mmmm."

Donnie heard his mother and father moving about the kitchen, their voices muffled. He could smell oatmeal cooking. There was an iron grating in the floor beside his bed through which an inadequate supply of hot air would rise in winter when the coal furnace was in use. He rested his cheek on the edge of the pillow and stared down through the iron filigree. Below in the dining room, he could see the curved glass edge of the china cabinet, the side Eloise kept hitting with her paddle when they played ping-pong on the dining-room table.

Donnie got out of bed and went into the hall. Eloise flew out of her room like a partridge, dashed ahead of him into the bathroom, and slammed the door. He heard the hook dropping into the ring. He was locked out.

"I have to go."

"I'm in here."

"Hurry up!"

"I'll be out in a minute!"

Donnie grabbed the knob and shook the door just hard enough not to tear the hook out of the flimsy panel. "Come on, hurry!"

Their mother shouted from the kitchen. "Hush up, you two."

Donnie went back and stood in the bedroom doorway. Normie remained covered, his eyes closed, but he said through immobile lips: "Methought I heard a voice cry sleep no more."

Washed and dressed, Donnie waited for Normie and they thundered downstairs together. Eloise was in her place, putting salt on her oatmeal. Their father sat at the head of the table, his perpetual smile encompassing the movements of his spoon. Their mother stood at the stove, with hair unkempt, a cigarette between her lips, stirring the pot, keeping the cereal from sticking. She scooped it up and scraped it into bowls. Donnie and Normie crowded shoulder to shoulder on one side of the table. Only two weeks into summer, their knees were already mottled with bruises and scabs.

"Don't pick at that," their mother said. She was hammering the hot porridge loose from the spoon against the rim of the pot.

Donnie peered up into her face. She looked a hundred years old. Never till now had he considered her age. He was twelve, his birthday just passed. Eloise, the oldest, was fourteen. Could his mother be much older than forty? There was a photograph in a frame on top of the china cabinet showing her in a lacy dress, posed in front of the hollyhocks beside the house. Her hair had been dark when

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the picture was taken, and brushed away from her broad forehead in an attractive way, her face composed in a tolerant smile.

"The horseshoe tournament is today," Eloise said.

"You'll wreck your fingers," her mother warned her.

"I'm putting tape on them. I don't care, anyway. I'm not practicing the piano for the rest of the summer."

Donnie thought of the stacks of music on top of the upright piano in the living room, some of it the songs his father sang—"Bonnie Wee Thing" and "Bendermeer's Stream"—some of it the Chopin nocturnes and etudes his mother had played before she lost heart. "My fingers are stiff" was her excuse now for refusing to leave her chair. Eloise's specialty was an old ballad she played with halting precision as he and Normie leaned across her shoulders to read the words.

"In her eyes there was moonlight," they sang,
"And a rose in her hair . . ."

"We're not paying for lessons if you don't practice."

The children knew it humiliated their mother to mention the shortage of money and they sensed the depths of her sadness out of which the reference had come. Unable to help, they fell silent. At the head of the table Donnie's father smiled sweetly as he ate his porridge.

The boys ran all the way to the playgrounds, slapping a hand against a hip to augment the patter of their running shoes into the galloping of a cowboy's horse. Eloise did not run. She strolled after them at a sophisticated fourteen-year-old's pace. The horseshoe pits were busy all morning, iron shoes clanging against iron pegs, laughter erupting whenever a shoe careened out of the dirt and caught somebody on the anke.

Eloise didn't win the tournament but she lawyered away all morning and never lost an argument. "You moved it. I saw you slide it with your foot, it wasn't touching the peg. No score, throw again. Take it back, she's throwing this one again."

It rained after lunch and everybody managed to crowd inside the pavilion—hundreds of kids, it seemed, in sweaty clothes and running shoes, everybody screaming at once. Discipline arrived only with Eloise's decision to tell ghost stories. She began by telling the one about the deserted house and the children exploring, hearing a strange noise, rapping, rapping, the noise luring them upstairs, through corridors, eventually into a dark room and to a closed door,

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from behind which came the sound louder than before, rapping, rapping, and when the door was flung open—wrapping paper! And the kids fell around, trying not to wet themselves they were laughing so hard.

The rain thundered on the tarpaper roof, which leaked in several places. Every wooden panel in the pavilion walls had been dropped down, and through the apertures drifted freshened air heavy with the smell of wet earth and crushed grass. Somebody opened the battered piano and began hammering on the few keys that could still produce a noise.

Normie was shaking him. He had his head down on a table and sat up, blinking. "You look funny," Normie said. "What's the matter?"

The rain had stopped. The kids were all out on the giant-strides and the swings and the ocean-wave. Normie found an old baseball and two tattered mitts in the equipment box. They went under the chestnut trees beyond the pavilion and began tossing the ball back and forth, catching quite expertly, Normie scooping up a bad throw backhand on the first bounce.

"Jackie Robinson," Donnie said.

As the clouds passed and the sun burned down again, the heat rose and summer switched on its droning, rustling hum that would surround the boys until the crickets took over after dark. "Mother looks old," Donnie said.

"What?"

"What are we going to do when she dies?"

"She isn't."

The ball went back and forth. Whup. Thup.

"Don't you ever worry about dying?"

"You're crazy."

"I've been thinking about it."

"Quit talkin' like that."

The brothers heard, then saw, the stampede of kids toward Bleeker Hill. A pea wagon was rattling along on its way to the canning factory. Donnie and Normie caught up to the others as they surrounded the horse-drawn wagon like marauding Iroquois, snatching at vines, dragging from the load long strings of fat green pods. The farm lad on the wagon took swipes at them with a pitchfork, but they sensed he wasn't trying to injure anybody. The ripe peas were crisp and mealy, delicious washed down with water gulped from the

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dirty porcelain fountain near the toilet house. To Donnie, the water tasted of metal. As he drank, he stared at a glistening gob of chewing gum lying on the mesh, his eyes slipping out of focus.

"Wake up, Donnie!"

They went home and had supper. The mashed potatoes were lumpy and the sausages were burned, everything the way he liked it. Eloise rode away on her bicycle and came back long after dark, and their mother screamed at her out in the shed while she was dragging her bike inside. Before that, Donnie and Normie were on the big lawn across the road with the other kids, playing "Red Light" and "May I?" As darkness fell, there was running and chasing and he caught hold of the girl who had turned twelve and held her long enough to feel the softness of her chest under her flimsy blouse. She pulled away and he let her go, sensing he had done something for which he would never be forgiven.

The family sat in the living room, listening to records. James Melton sang "Una furtiva lagrima." Their father came into the room with a white paper bag, a pound of jumbo redskin peanuts. He tore newspaper pages in half, shaped a cone for each of them around his hand, poured the cones full of peanuts, and they sat eating and listening, contented as a colony of gibbons.

The light in the fringed lamp beside the piano was orange. It made Donnie's head ache. He closed his eyes. "Why do we have to have colored bulbs?" he said.

"You can't sleep here," his father said.

Such an authoritative command from his father was uncharacteristic. Hagerty opened his eyes and looked up at the operator of the diner. The globe behind the man was orange and its light penetrated like a laser beam. The rest of the booths were unoccupied.

"Outside. We're closing."

Hagerty turned his head, felt pain behind his eyes. The gravel yard was deserted. "Where's the bus?"

"The last bus left hours ago. I tried to wake you half a dozen times." The man's voice as he shifted Hagerty from the booth was not unsympathetic. "What were you drinking?"

On the pavement, Hagerty dropped his bag of clothes, leaned against a lamppost, and tried to organize his mind. The thing to do was to walk on down the road and find a taxi. With eleven hundred dollars on him, he could afford a cabride to Baytown. He patted his pockets, searched inside his jacket, and took out a folded sheet of

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paper. It was blank except for a two-inch scrawl at the bottom. The mark was almost Hagerty's signature.

He remembered now. Victor Wargraves! The amber liquid in the flask must have been something other than bourbon. A sense of inevitability rose inside him like an icy tide. The money would be gone. Not in that pocket, not in that one—not in any of them. Wargraves had drugged him and robbed him and run away, after promising him a return to his childhood in exchange for his immortal soul. To put that one over the man must have hypnotized him, too.

The police were sympathetic but not optimistic about their chances of finding the money or the thief. "He's a few hundred miles away by now, sir, in any direction. And I doubt if his real name is anything like Wargraves. No, you won't ever come across that one again. But let us give you a drive back to Metralia."

Hagerty had his key, his clothes, and this dark house that had always given him the impression that it would rather belong to somebody else. He had a teaching job to go to in the autumn and a summer job at Cedar Lake if the YMCA would accept him back. Things could be worse.

He thanked his driver, climbed out of the police car, mounted the front steps, and unlocked the door. Inside, he switched on a light and called to his wife. "Liz!"

There was no reply. She must be sleeping soundly. Usually, whenever he came in late, he heard her welcoming voice down the stairway and would find her sitting up in bed—smooth shoulders, smiling brown eyes. Of course, she didn't expect him home tonight, she thought he was at camp.

He went into the kitchen, switched on the light, approached the refrigerator for a cold drink, and saw her note taped to the avocado door.

"Dear Don:

"Try to understand that I love you and would never hurt you. But isn't it true that you and I have been going our own ways recently? Anyway, I don't intend to vanish from your life, only to move on and try something different.

"Mr. Wargraves says my picture doesn't do me justice. Thank you for telling him such nice things about me. We intend to try Montreal first, maybe look in on Norman. If so, I'll give him your regards. Then it's on to—who can say?

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May you do well in your own adventure. I can understand why you felt you had to get away.

"Love, Liz."

Hagerty left the note on the counter and went upstairs. He stumbled into Peter's room, turned on the desk light, and began rummaging through his son's papers. It was something he'd never done before, but he had to find out where the boy was living these days so he could plead with him to drop whatever he was doing and come back home.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

SHANNON OCORK

Rhetta was always pretending something ordinary was something splendid. Rhetta called what she did romantic idealism, a real twenty-dollar phrase for, in Everett's opinion, five-cent chicanery. Of course, he'd let her alone about it. One thing he'd learned a long time ago was that you can't change a woman, you can only get rid of one . . .

WELL WORTH IT

by SHANNON OCORK

The day after he buried his wife was Everett Gary's sixtieth birthday. And when he awoke that morning, for just a moment he forgot Rhetta was gone. His breakfast coffee was not steaming in his favorite cup on the end table beside his bed and Everett, noticing this, was irritated.

She doesn't love me, he thought as he often had. She never loved me. And then he remembered.

He relaxed then and lay for a few minutes wiggling his toes under the sheets Rhetta had liked so much. They were a faded-pink now. Before she washed them so hard, they'd been a deeper color. There were still dark splotches in places on the bottom sheet. Wild rose, Rhetta had called the color, for no reason Everett could understand. Pink was pink, light or dark, and fancy names never changed a workhorse into a racer or a bad woman into a good one that he'd ever heard or seen. But Rhetta had been young—twenty years younger than he was to the day—which should have made this Rhetta's birthday, too.

Rhetta was always pretending something ordinary was something splendid. Rhetta called what she did romantic idealism, a real

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twenty-dollar phrase for, in Everett's opinion, five-cent chicanery. Everett said what she did was try and change what was into what she wished it to be, which was truth-twisting, and Everett held no truck with that. Of course, he'd let her alone about it. One thing he'd learned a long time ago was that you can't change a woman, you can only get rid of one.

He would have to make his own breakfast from now on, but that was okay. Before he and Rhetta married last year—they'd managed only a year together, a year and a few months (it seemed longer, seemed interminable, he joked to himself)—he'd gotten his own breakfast. Lunch and dinner, too, for three years of widowerhood. He hadn't known then how well off he'd been—and wasn't that always the way it was?

Flapjacks. And he'd slice a banana on top and open up the maple syrup.

Everett rolled out of bed, left the bed unmade, and pulled on yesterday's trousers and yesterday's shirt. This was the way a man ought to live, he told himself, nodding his head for emphasis, no fol-de-rol and feminine fix-it-up. He'd had an inkling when he married Rhetta that she was a bit of a fussbudget in the cleaning department. A good woman usually was. His father told him you could tell a woman's character by the way she kept a house. Well, nobody was always right and maybe Rhetta would be the exception that proved the rule. But no. Everett had been in awe of Rhetta's compulsive cleanliness. The rows of cleansing powders in the pantry, the deodorant sprays, the different brands of detergents in bottles and boxes and the little color-coordinated scouring pads . . . I'll hire a woman one day a week, thought Everett. That'll do just fine.

She'd had nice hair, though. Long yellow hair she wore in a braid until the nighttime. Then she'd let him pull it loose and comb it. Her hair smelled of apricots, and when he rippled it and fanned it with his fingers after he'd got the tangles out it reminded him of brook water running free over the rocks of his knuckles. And her body smelled of gardenia. It was the perfume she used and the body powder. Expensive tomfoolery. She could have got as good at the dime store for a tenth the cost, but Rhetta believed in spending money. And had he ever said a word? Not on your life. Once, twice maybe, he'd whistled when he'd seen the bills, but it was her money she spent on such things, and just try to talk money-sense to a woman.

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I should have known before I did, he thought. The way she kept herself. I should have known she wasn't saving it all for me.

Everett stretched and scratched his stomach and looked out the bedroom window. The back yard was all torn up, dug up. Three holes—one a swamp—and a mess of loose dirt. And in an hour and a half Thorn Bubbis would be back, digging again. But this time the diviner was coming, Junior Ray. Last week, for the third time, Everett filed a petition for permission to dig for water. Twice before, the chosen spot had failed.

The first hole was at the southern edge of Everett's lawn, just inside the property line, behind the paved road, to the right of Leland's. That time Thorn Bubbis had drilled down 240 feet before he quit—in disgust, he said, "and in a little bit of wonderment."

He'd stood at the rim of the well hole, which was banked by a high lip of granite dust, and stared disconsolately at the miserable, dry hole. "First time, ever, anybody around here drilled to nothin'," he said. "Seventeen years I been at it on my own and forty-odd my daddy was before me. And never, never did we go deep dry.

"My daddy told me once he had to drill to two hundred before he hit. The Wharton place. That was in the days when it took fifteen–twenty minutes to drill a foot, pile-drivin' down, burnin' through the rock layer by layer. Took 'im weeks. But when he struck, it was into clear, sweet water and lots of it. I drilled to two sixty once, but we were into trickles at a hundred eighty feet, about a hundred a gallon a day. Then into twice that at two ten, and then we broke through into a good water seam. But this is the first time I never got nothin'. Ev'rett, this hole you got I'd say is about the driest hole known to man outside of Death Valley, Arizona." And then Thorn spit down the well casing, climbed back into his truck, and hauled away his gear.

And Everett had stood in the road and watched him leave and wondered: Are you the one?

The second hole was the swamp hole, dug to hold the debris and the slop thrown up by the drill as it punched through the shelves of rock, seeking water. This was a wide, shallow hole, about eight feet across and four feet deep, half full of stagnant water, green as moss.

The third hole was the second attempt at a water well. When Thorn Bubbis drilled that time, he never got out of his derrick. He sat in the cab all day with a straight line to his mouth and no hello,

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just moving the drill gears. He didn't even talk to his assistant, Dick Farquar, in the water truck. So that day Dick set Mickey Mouse phones on his ears and listened to Johnny Cash on his Walkman, belted to his waist.

Thorn dug that hole on the northern side of Everett's house, just in front of the mailbox, beside the yew hedge. The yew separated Everett Gary's property line from Otis Haggar's. A portion of the hedge had had to be pulled up for Thorn's truck to get in position, and Everett agreed to replant the yew when the landscaper came to roll and reseed the ground after water had been found and the pipes set in.

Thorn Bubbis drilled down in what Everett thought of as the hedge-hole to 180 feet. Then he stopped. He told Everett: "It's just a waste of good money to keep on poundin' down into the dry. I don' know what to tell you, boy."

So Everett had called up Junior Ray, the water diviner. Thorn Bubbis didn't believe in divining powers, and never recommended Junior's services even though Junior was Thorn's nephew on his sister's side. Thorn said he'd dig where Junior indicated if Everett wanted, though. "I feel sorry for you, boy," said Thorn. He'd laid a heavy hand on Everett's shoulder.

"The good Lord knows I need the water," said Everett.

Rhetta had been there then. She'd stood on the hump of mud around the swamp hole, barefoot like a kid, poking her cherry-red toenails in and out of the dirt. She'd worn a loose brown dress, belted high to hide her tummy, not that there was that much to it yet. Everett watched Rhetta and Thorn together to see what he could see. But if Thorn Bubbis was the one, it didn't show.

She told him before they married she didn't want no kid, and Everett had told her that looking at sixty and already raising up two *he* sure didn't. Still, he'd been careful. He hadn't wanted any mistakes.

When she told him, he wondered who. "I don' know how that can be, Rhetta," he said. He'd given her a good hard look.

"Well, maybe I'm wrong," Rhetta said. She had her arms crossed over her chest, her palms tucked into her armpits.

"We'll see," said Everett. He waited and watched her belly stretch and wondered who.

Monday of last week he spent the whole day at the courthouse filing his third water petition. Then he went to his son's house for dinner. Rhetta was supposed to meet him there, but when he arrived

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Terry, Judson's wife, said Rhetta had called, too sick to come. "Woman problems," Terry said. Everett had called home immediately. The phone rang and rang.

When he got home, Rhetta was on the sofa, under the afghan. She told him he'd been right after all, and she'd been wrong. It must have been a false pregnancy, a psychological thing, and she showed him a book which, she said, told all about it.

Everett yanked up her nightie and examined her belly. It was flat again—a little soft, but flat again. "I'm glad," he said, knowing what she'd done and wondering *who*. He didn't ask. He smoothed the gown back down.

"So am I," said Rhetta

The next night he took her out to dinner. She cried all through it. And then he loved her long into the night. But he stayed careful and didn't make any mistakes.

Eight nights ago that had been. It was after that she started to hemorrhage. Now Rhetta was gone, and Everett wondered if he'd ever know *who* for sure.

Waiting for Junior Ray and Thorn Bubbis, he made himself buttermilk pancakes.

Junior came first, in an orange-and-white van with a five-color rainbow on the side panel, ending in a waterfall. Junior was a strong man, built like a steer, fat laced through the muscle. He had a simple, open face.

"I use braising rods," he explained, showing Everett. Two long reddish iron rods sat inside wide silver-steel sleeves. The rods bent at a right angle just above the sleeves and extended two feet, parallel to the ground. "The best people use willow, the ones who come by it natural. I was taught; taught by a Seminole Indian. I've never been wrong since I hired-out divining, and I come with a guarantee. It's a one-time fifty dollars charge, though I can't tell you how good the water I'll find will be, and I can only guestimate how much."

"How do you do it?" asked Everett. Rhetta would have liked to be here watching the diviner, he thought. She liked magic; believed in it; practiced it: Rhetta could turn something ordinary into something splendid quicker than a magician could change a handkerchief into a bouquet of tulips.

"It's a feeling," said Junior Ray. "You feel the water moving inside you. The rods themselves are activated by water chemistry, somehow. Science can't explain it. Let me show you now."

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Junior held his hands close to his massive chest, gripping the silver-steel sleeves of the rods just like he would hold the reins of a buggy horse, the hands in fists turned sideways, thumbs up and lying lightly on the middle joints of the index fingers. Holding both hands steady, the rods close together and straight out, Junior began to walk, foot in front of foot in front of foot. His eyes were riveted on the tips of the braising rods which hung delicately before him in the air.

Everett wondered if Junior was the one.

Nothing happened until Junior had the rod tips over the shallow, brackish water of the swamp hole. Then, noiselessly, the rods swung wide, north to south, swung back, swung open again, maybe four inches apart. They held that way, hung motionless, over the water.

"See that now?" said Junior Ray. "Hardly no pull at all, and I get no feeling of water inside myself. This is just surface water you got collected here, and under it, not much."

Junior turned around and shook out the rods to clear them—break the attraction, he said—then repositioned them and said, "Now let's try it this way." He started walking toward Everett's 240-foot dry hole, the first hole Thorn Bubbis had drilled. Foot in front of foot, Junior proceeded. He held the rods evenly balanced and parallel to the ground, his fists tight against his chest. About six inches from the hole, the rods swung wildly back and forth, each time spreading wider and wider until they flapped as far apart as they could go. The tips pointed, like antennae, behind Junior Ray's elbows.

"Hell's bells," said Junior, "you got a rip tide down there, Ev'rett, a deep seam, and she's wide open. I can feel it in my chest strong enough to burst through."

"No," said Everett. He wished Rhetta could see him now. He'd be showing her a little magic of his own, and he didn't mean Junior Ray's divining rods. "No," said Everett again, to emphasize it. "There ain't no water down there, Junior."

"Hell there ain't," said Junior pleasantly.

Thorn Bubbis's derrick-crane, followed by Dick Farquar in the yellow water-truck, drove around the curve in the road and eased into Everett's yard.

"Hey, Thorn," said Junior. "Watch this here, willya?" And Junior backed away from the hole site, stepping carefully, foot behind foot. Thorn Bubbis watched from the driver's seat. Everett stayed where he was by the swamp hole. He didn't watch the divining rods. He watched Thorn's assistant, Dick Farquar.

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Dick jumped out of the water truck and vigorously rubbed his hands together. "Do it," he said.

Everett wondered if maybe it was Dick.

Junior backed away from the hole. The braising rods quivered and gyrated and after a time swung back from beyond Junior's elbows to hang together in their silver-steel sleeves, straight ahead, dead in the air. "Lookee there," breathed Junior. "And I could feel the water leave me, too, runnin' out down my legs as I pushed back. You got yourself a river there, Ev'rett, just a few more little-o feet down."

"Hell you say," said Thorn Bubbis from his cab-seat, but he was grinning as he hadn't since he first pronounced the hole dry.

"No, sir," said Everett Gary. "You ain't drilling down that hole no more. I ain't pouring good money down a hole done judged dry. You find me another wet spot, Junior. You got the whole yard to prospect in."

Grunting to himself, Thorn Bubbis got out of his truck. He stood on the rim of the granite dust and stared down the well casing. "Tell you what I'll do, Ev'rett," he said. "You lemme drill on in here a little bit. If nothing, then it's no charge to you. That fair?"

"That's fair as June," said Everett. He joined Thorn on the lip of the hole. "But I tell you true, Thorn, I'm really soured on this spot. This is where Rhetta wanted the well, y'know. She had some notion a ring of flowers round it would look nice. Now she's left me, I'd just as soon we found a new location. Like to start fresh, know what I mean?"

"Rhetta ain't come back, then," said Thorn. He looked level at Everett with brown eyes under spiky grey brows.

Dick Farquar edged closer to hear better.

Junior Ray walked his rods around the umbrella elm.

"Rhetta ain't comin' back," said Everett. "She's gone for good."

Thorn looked away from Everett, down at the loose dirt around the hole, mixed in with the dust from the pulverized rock pulled up by the drill. He didn't say anything for a while.

Dick Farquar gave the dirt-dust a kick. Powder dry, it blew up, drifted down. "You been shovelin' round this hole, Ev'rett?"

"Tidying up," said Everett. "Some of this rock dust spilled over on Leland's property—" He pointed to his neighbor's yard on the southern side. It had been freshly seeded. A fifty-pound bag of Roberts' Durable Green Grass for All Lawns, a quarter-full, sagged against the side of the garage. "Got to keep the peace with my

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neighbors. I shoveled all my mess off Leland's yesterday." Casually, Everett turned to Junior Ray. "You findin' anywhere else real wet?"

But Junior wasn't walking his rods. He was standing on the other side of Everett, his boots planted wide in the dirt, staring down. "I only met her once," said Junior. "She was a real sweet lady. You want I should call Sheriff Tully, Thorn?"

Thorn looked level at Everett. "I reckon maybe yes," he said.

Everett didn't move. "Whoa now," he said. "There ain't no call— You sayin' you think Rhetta's down there?" Everett shook his head. "Well, I'm damned. You want to dig that bad, you dig. But I wash my hands of it, and of you all, too. Amen." And Everett turned on his heel and stalked over to the elm tree and sat down in its shade. He shook a cigarette out of a pack he pulled from his pocket.

Thorn Bubbis nodded and went back to the drill-derrick and hoisted himself into the cab. Dick went to the water truck and began feeding out the hose. Junior Ray lay his rods on the ground and leaned against the board fence between Everett's yard and the Lelands'.

It took almost twenty minutes to get the drill positioned in the casing and the water to keep the drill cool flowing right. While Thorn Bubbis and Dick Farquar worked their gear, Junior Ray got a shovel out of the back of his van. With an easy, practiced swing of his shoulders, Junior started on the pile of dirt and rock dust around the well hole. He tossed each shovelful into the shallow swamp hole. It didn't take him long to work through all of it—and then, because he was going good, the muscles easy, a light sweat urging him on, he shifted to the mud around the swamp and shoveled that away, too. Lift-swing-dump, lift-swing-dump. When he was finished, he turned to Thorn and Dick. "Ain't nobody been diggin' here but you boys," he said. "I apologize to you, Mr. Gary."

About thirty minutes after that, the bit broke through into water. When Thorn cranked it up, the bit was wet its whole length—twenty feet—and it hadn't touched the bottom of the seam.

"Water," said Junior Ray. "Lots of good water. What did I tell you?"

Thorn was embarrassed. "I owe you an apology, too, Ev'rett. Two of 'em. I shouldn't have stopped the dig in the first place, and I had no right buttin' into your private business and overriding your wishes for your own property. I cost you money I shouldn't have."

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He jerked his head toward the second well hole he'd drilled. "But I'll erase that, and I am heartily sorry."

Everett stood up from where he'd been sitting under the elm. "You thought I killed Rhetta. As if I don' have enough grief."

"If you don' want this well," said Thorn, "I'll drill where you say, my cost."

"I reckon water's water, Thorn, and I'd rather have you off my property than on it, thanks just the same."

Thorn turned to Dick Farquar. "Let's clean up and get out," he said.

Junior Ray was already in his van, turned into the road.

Everett went into his house. He called Bern Schmidt and told him he could start laying the water pipe whenever he was ready. Then Everett sat at his kitchen table and watched, through the window, Thorn and Dick pack it in. Everett wondered if maybe, after all, it had been Tom Leland or Otis Haggar.

The night before last, Rhetta had been restless. She washed the sheets in the kitchen sink, over and over, until after midnight, trying to get the blood out. The color she called wild rose faded in the bleach, but some of the stains had set and stayed—yellow-brown, like turned leaves. She was pale from all the blood she'd lost and weak, but full of energy. She ironed the sheets dry and then made up their bed.

He held her in his arms until she got sleepy, and then he whispered in her ear: "Tell me who."

"I know you think you don't make mistakes, Ev," she said drowsily, "but everybody does, and there was only you, baby. That's all there ever was."

He reared back in the bed and hit her then. He didn't know how many times. He hit her for her truth-twisting, for trying to make something ordinary she'd done with someone else into something splendid done with him.

It took her the whole night to die. Toward dawn, at the end, she said: "I'm tired," or maybe it was "I tried." Everett wasn't sure. He'd had to wait the whole day with the body upstairs. Then in the dark he buried her at the bottom of the swamp hole. It hadn't taken long. The mud took her right in.

After the men left his yard and he was alone, Everett sighed. Today was his sixtieth birthday, he'd finally got his water, and the swamp hole was filled and leveled off—but what in the world had he wanted the extra water for in the first place? It must have been

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Rhetta's idea, water for all the cleaning and scrubbing she liked to do . . .

The following spring the underground runoff from the snows in the mountains of Vermont lifted the water level in the earth of Everett's yard. The new water pooled and mingled with the remains of Rhetta Gary. By July it had floated off enough of her long yellow hair to clog Everett's drain.

Billy Wyatt found the cause with his RotoRooter.

And finally Sheriff Tully came and took care of the rest, but they had to tear up the whole yard again to find her. And the new owners never could seem to get the well water as pure as they would have liked.

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"I've known some very hot-blooded redheads," said James Drake.

"Sure you have," said Rubin. "So has everyone. It's a self-fulfilling assumption. Redheaded children, especially girls, are forgiven for being nasty and ill-behaved. Parents sigh fatuously and mutter that it goes with the hair. The boys usually grow up having the stuffing knocked out of them by non-redheaded peers and that teaches them manners, but the girls don't. And if they're beautiful besides, they grow up knowing they can indulge their impoliteness to the hilt . . ."

The first Black Widowers story, "The Acquisitive Chuckle," appeared in the January 1972 EQMM. *The fourth* collection *of Black Widowers stories,* Banquets of the Black Widowers *(which will include "The Redhead"), is due soon from Doubleday . . .*

THE REDHEAD

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Mario Gonzalo, host of that evening's meeting of the Black Widowers, had evidently decided to introduce his guest with eclat. At least he rattled his glass with a spoon and, when everyone had broken off their preprandial conversations and looked up from their cocktails, Mario made his introduction. He had even waited for Thomas Trumbull's as-usual late arrival before doing so.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is my guest, John Anderssen—that's 's-s-e-n' at the end. You can discover anything you want about him in this evening's grilling. One thing, however, I must tell you now because I know that this bunch of asexual loudmouths will never discover it on their own. John has a wife who is, absolutely, the

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most gorgeous specimen of femininity the world has ever seen. And I say this as an artist with an artist's eye."

Anderssen reddened and looked uncomfortable. He was a blond young man, perhaps thirty, with a small mustache and a fair complexion. He was about five-ten in height and had rather chiseled features that came together to form a handsome face.

Geoffrey Avalon, looking down from his stiff-backed seventy-four inches, said, "I must congratulate you, Mr. Anderssen, although you need not take seriously Mario's characterization of ourselves as asexual. I'm sure that each of us is quite capable of appreciating a beautiful woman. I, myself, although I might be considered to be past the first flush of hot-blooded youth, can—"

Trumbull said, "Spare us, Jeff, spare us. If you're going to give an embarrassing account of your prowess, you're better off being interrupted. From my point of view, the next best thing to having the young woman in our midst—if our customs allowed it—would be to see her photograph. I imagine, Mr. Anderssen, you carry a photo of your fair wife in your wallet. Would you consent to let us look at it?"

"No," said Anderssen emphatically. Then, blushing furiously, he said, "I don't mean you can't look at it. I mean I don't have a photograph of her about me. I'm sorry." But he said it challengingly, and was clearly not sorry.

Gonzalo, unabashed, said, "Well, that's your loss, my friends. You should see her hair. It's gloriously red, a live red that just about glows in the dark. And natural, totally natural—and no freckles."

"Well," said Anderssen in half a mutter, "she stays out of the sun. —Her hair *is* her best feature."

Emmanuel Rubin, who had been standing on the outskirts looking rather dour, said in a low voice, "and temper to match, I suppose."

Anderssen turned to him and said, with an edge of bitterness, "She has a temper." He did not elaborate.

Rubin said, "I don't suppose there's a more durable myth than the one that redheads are hot-tempered. The redness of the hair is that of fire, and the principles of sympathetic magic lead people to suppose that the personality should match the hair."

James Drake, who shared with Avalon the dubious privilege of being the oldest of the Widowers, sighed reminiscently and said, "I've known some very hot-blooded redheads."

"Sure you have," said Rubin. "So has everyone. It's a self-fulfilling assumption. Redheaded children, especially girls, are forgiven for

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being nasty and ill-behaved. Parents sigh fatuously and mutter that it goes with the hair, and the one with red hair in the family explains how Great-Uncle Joe would mop up the floor with anyone in the barroom who said anything that was less than a groveling compliment. The boys usually grow up having the stuffing knocked out of them by non-redheaded peers and that teaches them manners, but the girls don't. And if they're beautiful besides, they grow up knowing they can indulge their impoliteness to the hilt. An occasional judicious kick in the fanny would do them worlds of good."

Rubin carefully did not look at Anderssen in the course of his comment and Anderssen said nothing at all.

Henry, the indispensable waiter at all the Black Widower functions, said quietly, "Gentlemen, you may be seated."

The chef at the Milano had clearly decided to be Russian for the evening, and an excellent hot borscht was followed by an even more delightful Beef Stroganoff on a bed of rice. Rubin, who usually endured the food with an expression of stoic disapproval, on principle, allowed a smile to play over his sparsely bearded face on this occasion and helped himself lavishly to the dark pumpernickel.

As for Roger Halsted, whose affection for a good meal was legendary, he quietly negotiated a second helping with Henry.

The guest, John Anderssen, ate heartily, and participated eagerly in the conversation, which, through a logical association perhaps, dealt largely with the shooting down some months earlier of the Korean jetliner by the Soviets. Anderssen pointed out that the ship had been widely referred to as "Flight 007," which was the number on the fuselage. Then someone remembered that 007 was the code number of James Bond, so when the Soviets insisted the liner had been a spy plane, it became "Flight 7" in the news media and the "00" disappeared as though it had never been.

He also maintained vigorously that the jetliner, having gone off-course almost immediately after leaving Alaska, should not have been left uninformed of the fact. He was shouting, red-faced, that failure to do so, when the Soviet Union was known to be on the hair-trigger with respect to American reconnaissance planes and to Reagan's "evil empire" rhetoric, was indefensible.

He paid no attention, in fact, to his dessert, a honey-drenched baklava, left his coffee half finished, and totally ignored Henry's soft request that he make his wishes known with respect to the brandy. He was actually pounding the table when Gonzalo rattled

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his spoon against his water-glass and Avalon was forced to raise his baritone voice to a commanding, "Mr. Anderssen, *if* you please—"

Anderssen subsided, looking vaguely confused, as though he were, with difficulty, remembering where he was.

Gonzalo said, "It's time for the grilling, and Jeff, since you seem to have the commanding presence needed in case John here gets excited, suppose you do the honors."

Avalon cleared his throat, gazed at Anderssen solemnly for a few moments, then said, "Mr. Anderssen, how do you justify your existence?"

Anderssen said, "What?"

"You exist, sir. Why?"

"Oh," said Anderssen, still collecting himself. Then in a low harsh voice he said, "To expiate my sins in an earlier existence, I should think."

Drake, who was at the moment accepting a refresher from Henry, muttered, "So are we all. —Don't you think so, Henry?"

And Henry's sixtyish unlined face remained expressionless as he said, very quietly, "A Black Widowers banquet is surely a reward for virtue rather than an expiation for sins."

Drake lifted his glass. "A palpable hit, Henry."

Trumbull growled, "Let's cut out the private conversations."

Avalon raised his hand. "Gentlemen! As you all know, I do not entirely approve of our custom of grilling a guest in the hope of searching out problems that might interest us. Nevertheless, I wish to call your attention to a peculiar phenomenon. We have here a young man—young certainly by the standards of old mustaches such as ourselves—well proportioned, of excellent appearance, seeming to exude good health and an air of success in life, though we have not yet ascertained what the nature of his work is—"

"He's in good health and is doing well at his work," put in Gonzalo.

"I am glad to hear it," said Avalon gravely. "In addition, he is married to a young and beautiful woman, so that one can't help but wonder why he should feel life to be such a burden as to lead him to believe that he exists only in order to expiate past sins. Consider, too, that during the meal just concluded, Mr. Anderssen was animated and vivacious, not in the least abashed by our older and wiser heads. I believe he shouted down even Manny, who is not one to be shouted down with impunity."

"Anderssen was making a good point," said Rubin indignantly.

"I think he was, too," said Avalon, "but what I wish to stress is

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that he is voluble, articulate, and not backward at expressing his views. Yet during the cocktail period, when the conversation dealt with his wife, he seemed to speak most reluctantly. From this, I infer that the source of Mr. Anderssen's unhappiness may be Mrs. Anderssen. —Is that so, Mr. Anderssen?"

Anderssen seemed stricken and remained silent.

Gonzalo said, "John, I explained the terms. You must answer."

Anderssen said, "I'm not sure how to answer."

Avalon said, "Let me be indirect. After all, sir, there is no intention to humiliate you. And please be aware that nothing said in this room is ever repeated by any of us elsewhere. That includes our esteemed waiter, Henry. Please feel that you can speak freely. —Mr. Anderssen, how long have you been married?"

"Two years. Actually, closer to two and a half."

"Any children, sir?"

"Not yet. We hope to have some one day."

"For that hope to exist, the marriage must not be foundering. I take it you are not contemplating divorce."

"Certainly not."

"I take it then that you love your wife?"

"Yes. And before you ask, I am quite satisfied she loves me."

"There is, of course, a certain problem in being married to a beautiful woman," said Avalon. "Men *will* flock about beauty. Are you plagued by jealousy, sir?"

"No," said Anderssen. "I've no cause for it. Helen—that's my wife—has no great interest in men."

"Ah," said Halsted, as though a great light had dawned.

"Except for myself," said Anderssen indignantly. "She's not in the least bit asexual. Besides," he went on, "Mario exaggerates. She does have this luxuriant head of remarkable red hair, but aside from that she is not really spectacular. Her looks, I would say, are average—though I must rely now on your assurance that all said here is confidential. I would not want *that* assessment to be repeated. Her figure is good, and *I* find her beautiful, but there are no men caught helplessly in her toils, and I am not plagued by jealousy."

"What about her temper?" put in Drake suddenly. "That's been mentioned and you've admitted she has one. I presume there's lots of fighting and dish-throwing?"

"Some fights, sure," said Anderssen, "but no more than is par for the course. And no dish-throwing. As Mr. Avalon has pointed out, I'm articulate, and so is she, and we're both pretty good at shouting,

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but after we work off our steam we can be just as good at kissing and hugging."

"Then am I to take it, sir, that your wife is *not* the source of your troubles?" said Avalon.

Anderssen fell silent again.

"I must ask you to answer, Mr. Anderssen," said Avalon.

Anderssen said, "She *is* the problem. Just now, anyway. But it's too silly to talk about."

Rubin sat up at that and said, "On the contrary. Till now I felt Jeff was just wasting our time over the kind of domestic irritations that we attend these dinners, in part, to escape. But if there's something *silly* involved, then we want to hear it."

"If you must know," said Anderssen, "Helen says she's a witch."

"Oh?" said Rubin. "Has she always claimed this, or just recently?"

"Always. We joke about it. She said she put me under enchantment to get me to marry her, and that she casts spells to get me a promotion or a raise. That sort of thing."

Rubin said, "It sounds harmless to me. She probably *did* put you under enchantment. You fell in love with her and any woman of reasonable intelligence and looks can make a young man fall in love with her if she works hard enough at being charming. You can call that enchantment if you wish."

"But I *do* get the promotions and raises."

Halsted said, "You don't really act disturbed at this, Mr. Anderssen. After all, this sort of play-acting by a young and vivacious woman isn't unusual. Personally, I find it charming. Why don't you?"

Anderssen said, "Because she pulled it on me once too often. She did something I can't understand." He threw himself back in his chair and stared somberly at the table in front of him.

Trumbull bent to one side as though to look into Anderssen's eyes and said, "You mean you think she really is a witch?"

"I don't know what to think. I just can't explain what she did."

Avalon said forcibly, "Mr. Anderssen, I must ask you to explain just what it was Mrs. Anderssen did. Would you do that, sir?"

"Well," said Anderssen, "maybe I should. If I talk about it, maybe I can forget it. —But I don't think so."

He brooded a bit and the Widowers waited patiently.

Finally he said, "It was about a month ago—on the sixteenth. We were going out for dinner, just the two of us. We do that once in a while, and we like to try new places. We were trying a new place this time, the door to which was reached by passing through the

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lobby of a small midtown hotel. It was an unpretentious restaurant, but we had had good reports of it. —The trouble started in the lobby.

"I don't remember exactly what set it off. In fact, I don't even remember what it was all about, really. What happened afterward pushed it out of my mind. What it amounted to was that we had a—a disagreement. In less than a minute, we would have been inside the restaurant and studying the menu, and instead we were standing to one side of the lobby under a potted plant of some sort. I can remember the sharply pointed leaves touching my hand disagreeably when I waved it to make a point. The registration desk was across the way, between the door to the restaurant and the door to the street. The scene is still painted in my mind.

"Helen was saying, 'If that's your attitude, we don't have to have dinner together.'

"I swear to all of you, I don't remember what my attitude was, but we're both of us highly vocal, and we were both of us furious. The whole thing was very embarrassing. It was one of those times when you and someone else—usually your wife or girl friend, I suppose—are shouting at each other in whispers. The words are being squeezed out between clenched teeth and every once in a while one of you says, 'For heaven's sake, people are staring,' and the other says, 'Then shut up and listen to reason,' and it just keeps on and on."

Anderssen shook his head at the memory. "It was the most intense argument we'd ever had up to that time, or since, and yet I can't remember what it was about. Unbelievable!

"Then she suddenly said, 'Well, then, I'm going home. Goodbye.' I said, 'Don't you dare humiliate me by leaving me in public.' And she said, 'You can't stop me.' I said, 'Don't tempt me or I *will* stop you.' And she said, 'Just try,' and dashed into the restaurant.

"That caught me by surprise. I had thought she'd try to get past me to the door to the street and I was ready to seize her wrist and hang on. It would have been better to let her go than to make a scene, I suppose, but I was past reason. In any case, she fooled me and made a dash for the restaurant.

"I was stunned for a few moments—and then I hurried in after her. I may have been twenty seconds behind her. —Let me describe the restaurant. It was not a large one, and it had the deliberate decor of a living room.

"It had about a dozen tables," Anderssen proceeded, "the largest of which would hold six. There were windows with drapes, but not

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real windows. They had city views painted on them. There was a fireplace in the wall opposite the entrance door with artificial logs in it, and a couch facing it. The couch was real and, I suppose, could be used by people who were waiting for the rest of their party to arrive. At least, there was a man sitting on the left end of the couch. He had his back to me and was reading a magazine that he held rather high and close to his head as though he were near-sighted. I judged from its typography that it was *Time*—"

Avalon put in suddenly, "You seem to be a good observer since you are going into such minutiae. Is this important that you've just told us?"

"No," said Anderssen, "I suppose not, but I'm trying to impress on you that I was not hysterical and that I saw everything there was to see quite clearly. When I came in, about half the tables were taken, with two to four people at each. There may have been fifteen to twenty people present. There were no waitresses on the scene at the moment and the cashier was stationed to one side of the door in a rather unobtrusive recess, so it really did look like a living room."

Drake stubbed out his cigarette. "It sounds like an idyllic place. What was present there that disturbed you?"

"Nothing was present there that disturbed me. That's the point. It was what was absent there. *Helen* wasn't there. She had gone in. I saw her go in. I am *not* mistaken. There was no other door on that side of the lobby. There was no crowd within which she might have been lost to view for a moment. My vision was entirely unobstructed and she went in and did not come out. I followed in her tracks and entered, at the most, twenty seconds after her—and she wasn't there. I could tell that at a glance."

Trumbull growled. "You can't tell anything at a glance. A glance will fool you."

"Not in this case," said Anderssen. "Mario mentioned Helen's hair. There's nothing like it. At least I've seen nothing like it. There may have been, at most, ten women in that room and not one had red hair. Even if one of them had been a redhead, I doubt she would have been in quite the fluorescent and lavishly spectacular way that Helen was. Take my word for it. I looked at everyone and there was no Helen. She had disappeared."

"She'd gone out to the street by another entrance, I suppose," said Halsted.

Anderssen shook his head. "There was no entrance to the street.

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I checked with the cashier and with the maitre de. I've gone back there since to have lunch and managed to look over the place. There isn't any entrance to the outside. What's more, the windows are fakes and they're solid something-or-other. They don't open. There are ventilation ducts, of course, but they're not big enough for a rabbit to crawl through."

Avalon said, "Even though the windows are fake, you mentioned drapes. She might have been standing behind one of them."

"No," said Anderssen, "the drapes hug the wall. There would have been an obvious bump if she were behind one. What's more, they only come down to the bottom of the window and there are two feet of bare wall beneath them. She would have been visible to mid-thigh if she were standing behind one."

"What about the lady's room?" inquired Rubin. "You know, so strong is the taboo against violating the unisex nature of these things, we tend to forget the one we don't use is even there."

"Well, I didn't," said Anderssen, with clear exasperation. "I looked around for it, didn't see one, and when I asked later it turned out that both rest-rooms were in the lobby."

"All right," prompted Rubin. "So you've followed your wife into the restaurant and don't see her—"

"A waitress showed up while I was looking around and I said to her in, I suppose, a rather distracted voice, 'Did a redheaded woman just come in here?'

"The waitress looked at me in a rather alarmed way and mumbled, 'I didn't see anyone,' and hastened to deliver her tray-load to one of the tables.

"I hesitated because I was conscious of my embarrassing position, but I saw no way out. I raised my voice and said, 'Did anyone here see a redheaded woman come in just a moment ago?' There was dead silence. Everyone looked up at me, staring stupidly. Even the man on the couch turned his head to look at me and he shook his head at me in a clear negative. The others didn't even do that much, but their vacant stares were clear enough indication that they hadn't seen her.

"Then it occurred to me that the waitress must have emerged from the kitchen. For a minute, I was sure that Helen was hiding there and I felt triumphant. Regardless of the fact that my actions might induce some of the staff to call hotel security, or the police even, I marched firmly through a pair of swinging doors into the kitchen.

"There was the chef there, a couple of assistants, and another

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waitress, but no Helen. There was one small further door which might have been a private lavatory for the kitchen staff, and I had gone too far to back down. I walked over and flung the door open. It *was* a lavatory, and it was empty. By then the chef and his assistants were shouting at me, and I said, 'Sorry,' and left quickly. I didn't see any closets there large enough to hold a human being.

"I stepped back into the restaurant. Everyone was still looking at me, and I could do nothing but return to the lobby. It was as though the instant Helen had passed through the doorway into the restaurant she had vanished—" Anderssen sat back, spread his hands in blank despair "—just vanished."

Drake said, "What did you do?"

Anderssen said, "I went out and talked to the cashier. She had been away from her station for a few moments and hadn't even seen *me* go in, let alone Helen. She told me about the rest-rooms and that there was no exit to the street.

"Then I went to talk to the maitre de, which demoralized me further. He was busy and I had to wait. I wanted to yell, 'This is a matter of life and death,' but I was beginning to think I would be carried off to an asylum if I didn't behave in a totally proper way. And when he finally spoke to me, the maitre de turned out to be a total zero."

"And then what did you do?" asked Drake.

"I waited in the lobby for about half an hour. I thought Helen might show up again; that she had been playing some practical joke and that she would return. Well, no Helen. I could only spend my time fantasizing, as I waited, of calling the police, of hiring a private detective, of personally scouring the city, but what could I tell the police? That my wife had been missing for an hour? That my wife had vanished under my eyes? And I didn't know any private detectives. For that matter, I didn't know how to scour the city. So, after the most miserable half hour of my life, I did the only thing there was to do. I went home."

Avalon said solemnly, "I trust, Mr. Anderssen, that you are not going to tell us your wife has been missing ever since."

Gonzalo said, "She can't be, Jeff. I saw her two days ago."

Anderssen said, "She was waiting for me when I got home. For a minute, a wave of intense thankfulness swept over me. It had been a terrible taxi-ride. All I could think of was that she would have to be missing twenty-four hours before I could call the police and how would I live through the twenty-four hours? And what would the

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police be able to do? So I just grabbed her and held onto her. I was on the point of weeping I was so glad to see her. And then, of course, I pushed her away and said, 'Where the hell have you been?'

"She said coolly, 'I told you I was going home.'

"I said, 'But you ran into the restaurant.'

"She said, 'And then I came home. You don't suppose I needed a broomstick, do you? That's quite old-fashioned. I just—*pfft*—and I was home.' She made a sweeping motion of her right hand.

"I was furious. I had gotten completely over my relief. I said, 'Do you know what you've put me through? Can you imagine how I felt? I rushed in like a damn fool and tried to find you and then I just stood around. —I almost went to the police.'

"She grew calmer and icier and said, 'Well, it serves you right. I *told* you I was going home. There was no need for you to do anything at all but come home, too. Here I am. Just because you refuse to believe I have the power is no reason for you to scold me, when I did exactly what I told you I would do.'

"I said, 'Come on, now. You didn't *pfft* here. Where were you in the restaurant? How did you get here?'

"I could get no answer from her on that. Nor have I been able to since. It's ruining my life. I *resent* her having put me through an hour of hell. I *resent* her making a fool of me."

Avalon said, "Is the marriage breaking up as a result? Surely, you need not allow one incident—"

"No, it's not breaking up. In fact, she's been sweet as apple-pie ever since that evening. She hasn't pulled a single witch-trick, but it bothers me. I brood about it. I *dream* about it. It's given her a kind of—superiority."

Rubin said, "She's got the upper hand now, you mean."

"Yes," said Anderssen violently. "She's made a fool of me and gotten away with it. I *know* she's not a witch. I *know* there are no such things as witches. But I don't know how she did it, and I've got this sneaking suspicion she's liable to do it again. And it keeps me—it keeps me—*under*."

He shook his head and said, in a more composed way, "It's such a silly thing, but it's poisoning my life."

Again there was silence about the table. Then Avalon said, "Mr. Anderssen, we of the Black Widowers are firm disbelievers in the supernatural. Are you telling us the truth about the incident?"

Anderssen said fiercely, "I assure you I've told you the truth. If you have a Bible here, I'll swear on it. Or, which is better as far as

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I'm concerned, I'll give you my word as an honest man that everything I've told you is as completely true as my memory and my human fallibility will allow."

Avalon nodded. "I accept your word without reservation."

Gonzalo said, in an aggrieved way, "You might have told me, John. As I said, I saw Helen two days ago, and nothing seemed wrong to me. I had no idea— Maybe it's not too late for us to help."

"How?" said Anderssen. "How could you help?"

Gonzalo said, "We might discuss the matter. Some us may have some ideas."

Rubin said, "I have one—and, I think, a very logical one. I begin by agreeing with Anderssen and everyone else here that there is no witchcraft and that, therefore, Mrs. Anderssen is no witch. I think she went into the restaurant and somehow managed to evade her husband's eyes. Then when he was busy in the kitchen or with the waitress or maitre de, she left the restaurant quickly and took a taxi home. Now she won't admit what she did in order to stay one-up in this needless marriage combat. My own feeling is that a marriage is useless if—"

"Never mind the homilies," said Anderssen, the shortness of his temper-fuse showing again. "Of *course* that's what happened. I don't need you to explain it to me. But you skip over the hard part. You say she went into the restaurant and 'somehow managed to evade her husband's eyes.' Would you please tell me just how she managed that trick?"

"Very well," said Rubin. "I will. You came in, looked at everyone in the room, and were at once certain she wasn't there. Why? Because you were looking for an unmistakeable redhead. —Have you ever heard of a wig, Mr. Anderssen?"

"A *wig?* You mean she put on a *wig?"*

"Why not? If she appeared to have brown hair, your eyes would pass right over her. In fact, I suspect that her red hair is so much the most important thing you see in her that if she were wearing a brown wig and had taken a seat at one of the tables you could have been staring right at her face without recognizing it."

Anderssen said, "I insist I would have recognized her even so, but that point is of no importance. The important thing is that Helen has never owned a wig. For her to use one is unthinkable. She is as aware of her red hair as everyone else is, and she's vain about it. She wouldn't dream of hiding it. Such vanity is natural. I'm sure everyone here is vain about his intelligence."

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Rubin said, "I grant you. Intelligence is something to be vain about. Yet if it served some purpose that seemed important to me, I would pretend to be an idiot for a few minutes, or even considerably longer. I think your wife would have been willing to slip on a wig just long enough to escape your eye. Vanity is never an absolute in anyone who isn't an outright fool."

Anderssen said, "I know her better than you do, and I say she wouldn't own a wig. Besides, this was a month ago. It was the height of summer and it was a hot evening. All Helen was wearing was a summer dress with summer underwear beneath. She had a light shawl to put on against the air-conditioning and she was carrying a small pocketbook just large enough to contain some money and her makeup. There was nowhere she could have hidden a wig. She had no wig with her. Why should she have brought one with her, anyway? I can't and won't believe she was deliberately planning to have a fight, to trick me in this way in order to achieve a long-term upper hand. She's a creature of impulse. She's incapable of making plans of that kind. I *know* her."

Trumbull said, "Conceding her vanity and impulsiveness, what about her dignity? Would she have been willing to duck under one of the tables and let the tablecloth hide her?"

"The tablecloths didn't come down to the floor. I would have seen her. —I tell you, I've gone back to the restaurant and studied it in cold daylight. There is *nowhere* she could have hidden. I was even desperate enough to wonder if she could have worked her way up the chimney, but the fireplace isn't real and isn't attached to one."

Drake said, "Anyone have any other ideas? I don't."

There was silence.

Drake turned half about in his chair. "Do you have anything to volunteer, Henry?"

Henry said, with a small smile, "Well, Dr. Drake, I have a certain reluctance to spoil Mrs. Anderssen's fun."

"Spoil her fun?" said Anderssen in astonishment. "Are you telling me that you know what happened?"

Henry said, "I know what might easily have happened, sir, that would account for her disappearance without the need for any sort of witchcraft."

"What was it, then?"

"Let me be certain I understand one point. When you asked the people in the restaurant if they had seen a redheaded woman enter,

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the man on the couch turned round and shook his head in a negative. Is that right?"

"Yes, he did. I remember it well. He was the only one who really responded."

"But you said the fireplace was at the wall opposite the door into the restaurant and that the couch faced it, so that the man had his back to you. He had to turn around to look at you. That means his back was also to the door, and he was reading a magazine. Of all the people there, he was least likely to see someone enter the door, yet he was the one person to take the trouble to indicate he had seen no one. Why should he have?"

"What has all that got to do with it, waiter?" said Anderssen.

"Call him Henry," muttered Gonzalo.

Henry said, "I would suggest that Mrs. Anderssen hurried in and took her seat on the couch, an ordinary and perfectly natural action that would have attracted no attention from a group of people engaged in dining and in conversation, even despite her red hair."

"But I would have seen her as soon as I came in," said Anderssen. "The back of the couch only reaches a person's shoulders and Helen is a tall woman. Her hair would have blazed out at me."

"On a chair," said Henry, "it is difficult to do anything but sit. On a couch, however, one can lie down."

Anderssen said, "There was a man already sitting on the couch."

"Even so," said Henry. "Your wife, acting on impulse, as you say she is apt to do, reclined. Suppose you were on a couch and an attractive redhead, with a fine figure, dressed in a skimpy summer costume, suddenly stretched out and placed her head in your lap; and that, as she did so, she raised her finger imploringly to her mouth, pleading for silence. It seems to me there would be very few men who wouldn't oblige a lady under those circumstances."

Anderssen's lips tightened. "Well—"

"You said the man was holding his magazine high, as though he were near-sighted, but that might be because he was holding it high enough to avoid the woman's head in his lap. And then, in his eagerness to oblige a lady, would he not turn his head and unnecessarily emphasize that he hadn't seen her?"

Anderssen rose. "Right! I'll go home right now and have it out with her."

"If I may suggest, sir," said Henry, "I would not do that."

"I sure will. Why not?"

"In the interest of family harmony, it might be well if you would

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let her have her victory. I imagine she rather regrets it and is not likely to repeat it. You said she has been very well behaved this last month. Isn't it enough that you know in your heart how it was done so that you needn't feel defeated yourself. It would be her victory without your defeat and you would have the best of both worlds."

Slowly, Anderssen sat down and, amid a light patter of applause from the Black Widowers, said, "You may be right, Henry."

"I think I am," said Henry.

DETECTIVERSE

MONTHLY MYSTERY

by SAMUEL G. HESTER

The Widowers Black have an uncanny knack
When it comes to the solving of crime.
They baffle their guests and myself, I confess,
With the right answer time after time.

But one mystery great they still hotly debate,
Even Henry can't help them detect—
When they finish at last with their evening's repast,
Which member gets stuck with the check?

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a *NEW* Inspector Cockrill story by

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Chief Inspector Cockrill stood at the little gate. For once his shabby mackintosh was not trailing over one shoulder but was worn with his arms in the sleeves, and pushed back upon his noble head with its spray of fine grey hair was the inevitable ill-fitting hat. Inspector Cockrill is known to pick up any hat that happens to be at hand, to the considerable inconvenience of the true owner. Anything that does not actually deafen and blind him is perfectly acceptable to the Terror of Kent . . .

Christianna Brand has twice won awards from the Mystery Writers of America for Inspector Cockrill stories, both of which first appeared in EQMM *("Twist for Twist" in 1967 and "Poison in the Cup" in 1969). It's a privilege to present this first new Cockie story in many, many years, and to introduce you to the first story in which the Duchess of Hawksmere also makes an appearance. We are delighted to hear from the author that the Dowager Duchess is destined to appear in future stories.*

Before you begin, the author has offered this helpful explanation of titles in England: "When a duke is married, his mother becomes the Dowager Duchess and retires to a 'Dower House' elsewhere on the estate. A duke's children take titles of their own—hence, upon his accession, this duke's daughter, Rebecca, becomes Lady Rebecca . . ."

"Q"

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THE MAN ON THE ROOF

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Sergeant Crum, who, with the assistance of only a fledgling constable, runs the tiny police station in the village of Hawksmere, rang up Chief Inspector Cockrill in Heronsford. "It's the Duke, sir. Phoned to the station and says he's going to shoot hisself."

"The Duke? What Duke? Your Duke, up at the castle?"

Sergeant Crum took a leisurely moment to reflect that in his own small neck of the woods they were hardly so rich in the gilded aristocracy as to necessitate discrimination. Inspector Cockrill, however, had not waited for an answer.

"What have you done about it?"

"Tried to get my constable, sir. Gets his dinner in the village, he does, being his home is there—the Sardine Tin, they call it these days, since the old people—"

"Yes, well, never mind your constable's domestic arrangements—"

"—and they told me he'd suddenly rushed off," continued Crum placidly. "Said he'd heard a shot or something of that. *They* hadn't heard nothing, but the old people are getting a bit—"

"Well, get after him fast, for goodness sake! I'll be there in half an hour at latest."

The sergeant pursued his unhurried way and at the North Gate leaned out of his car to question the lodgekeeper—and, learning that His Grace had gone down a two–three hours ago towards South Lodge, cursed himself mildly for not having thought of that and started on the long haul round the castle walls to what had once been the opposite entrance. South Lodge, of course! Fisher couldn't have heard a shot fired up at the castle.

The constable met him at the little wooden gate of the graveled path that led up to the lodge, clinging as though for support to his bicycle. Over his large, rather handsome young face was spread a strange pall of grey. He said, "He's dead, Sarge."

"Dead? He's done it?"

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"Seems like it. He's lying on the floor in the parlor. Lot of blood around."

"You're sure? You didn't make certain?"

"Door's locked, sir. I looked in at the window, but it's too small to get through. And anyway—"

"I was held up. Started for the castle first. You came here direct?"

"Yessir. I heard the shot, I guessed what it might be. I knew he'd be here—I saw him this morning, turning in at the gate. So I got on me bike and came over."

The lodge was in fact a lodge no longer. In the not too distant past, its magnificent wrought-iron gates had been removed and the gap bricked up except for a small postern door. And the high wall ringing the castle and its grounds, rebuilt in a curve that now left the little house standing outside on its own, in an expanse something under an acre of dull, flat land, was at present covered in a blanket of Christmas snow about two inches deep. A hedge completed a sort of high ring around the building, with a break in it to admit of a small wooden gate leading up to the tiny porch over the front door.

The redundant lodgekeeper had been allowed to remain in residence until the accession of the present Duke about three years ago, when he had been evicted with his poor old wife, so that His Grace, whose single bleak passion was the collection and destruction of butterflies, might convert the place into a sort of playroom for himself and his hobby. Considering that there must, up at the castle, be at least seventy rooms which might equally have served his purpose, the dispossessed might be forgiven for suggesting resentfully—but not to the Duke—that a nook might have been created for him there.

Now, in the light snow, two narrow lines, clearly the marks of the constable's bicycle tires, led up and away from the front door—the return journey having apparently been decidedly wobbly. There was no other mark in the snow.

"No sign of his footsteps."

"No. It hadn't started snowing when I saw him going in through the gate." For whatever reason, the constable had lost more color. "That was a couple of hours ago."

"Oh, well." Sergeant Crum abandoned a secret hope that by delaying his errand until the Inspector should come, he might shift onto other shoulders the onus of the whole alarming affair, for sudden death is not a commonplace in quiet little Hawksmere, nestling under the calm shadow of the castle up the hill. He started off

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through the light flurry of swirling snow, some vague instinct suggesting that it might be well to avoid the tracks of the bicycle tires. You could see where the constable had propped his machine against the wall of the house and gone up the two or three steps. Snow was shuffled as his footprints came down and appeared to move round to the right.

"I ran round to the side window," said Fisher, following his glance. He indicated a small window to their left. "You can't see in so well from there."

"Yes, well, you'd know, wouldn't you?" said Sergeant Crum.

The door was secured by a Yale lock, the sort that clicks shut of itself, to be opened, when the door is closed, only by its own particular key. "Mm," said the sergeant. He tramped in the constable's footsteps leading round the house, and returned with his rugged countryman's visage the same curious shade of grey. "Certainly *looks* very dead," he said uncomfortably and lifted up his heart in a wordless prayer.

The prayer was answered. There came the throbbing of a car in the snowbound stillness and Chief Inspector Cockrill stood at the little gate. For once his shabby mackintosh was not trailing over one shoulder but was worn with his arms in the sleeves, and pushed back upon his noble head with its spray of fine grey hair was the inevitable ill-fitting hat. Inspector Cockrill is known to pick up any hat that happens to be at hand, to the considerable inconvenience of the true owner. Anything that does not actually deafen and blind him is perfectly acceptable to the Terror of Kent.

He remained for a long time intently surveying the scene: the little house in its flat white circle of snow, ringed in by the wall and the hedge so as to be almost invisible to anyone not looking in over the gate. Nice setting for a locked-room mystery, he thought: which God forbid! Fortunately, it appeared to have been a good, straightforward suicide, heralded in advance by the gentleman himself. And from what he had heard, there would be few to mourn the passing of the sixth Duke of Hawksmere—very few indeed.

A pretty little building, almost fairylike in its present aspect, its highly ornamental pseudo-Gothic façade aglitter with its dusting of snow. An octagonal room, flat-roofed, with a small side window where the lodgekeeper might sit watching for the first signs of approaching vehicles all ready to leap out and open the gates. Into this room, the door opened directly. There was an opposite door leading to the back of the house—two or three small rooms and the household offices. Only the front had been designed to be seen. The rest was

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cut off and hidden away behind it, considerably less decorative in appearance. The room was furnished only with a desk and a trestle table, upon which were distributed the tools of the Duke's preoccupation, a typewriter, and sheaves of paperwork. There was no other furniture in the house.

Inspector Cockrill stood quietly, taking it all in. The door leading to the other rooms was locked and bolted on this side. There could be nobody else in the house unless they had entered by a back door or window: and in fact there was nobody there. The body lay across the front door, so that, upon entering, one saw nothing but the head and shoulders (turned away from the door) and an outflung hand and arm. The shot had gone through the right temple and out through the other side of the head, somewhat higher up; a bullet was lodged much where one would have expected it to be, high up on the post of the opposite door. An open thermos jug stood on the desk with a puddle of cooling coffee left inside, and there was a piece of foil that had evidently been wrapped round a packet of sandwiches. The time was still early afternoon.

It was almost an hour before, having set in motion the wheels of investigative law, Mr. Cockrill decided: "Well, I'd better go up to the castle and see them there." But before he went, he summoned the constable to stand before him—very pale, hands hanging faintly twitching at his sides. "So, boy. Fish your name is, is it?"

"Fisher, sir," said the constable, hardly daring to contradict.

Inspector Cockrill conceded the point. "Well, now, once again—you heard this shot?"

"Having me dinner I was, sir, at home with me gran and grandad and Mum and Dad and all. And I heard this shot and I thought, the old bastard has done it at last. I mean," said the constable in a terrible hurry, "His-Grace-has-done-himself-in-at-last, sir!"

"You knew of this habit of the Duke's of constantly threatening suicide?"

"Being as he often rang up the station—which he did today, sir."

"Mm. Who else heard the shot?"

"Well, no one, Mr. Cockrill, sir. Gran and Grandad, they're a bit deaf and me mum and dad was arguing and the kids all quarreling, kicking up a row as usual. Besides—"

"Besides?"

"They'd've only said good riddance, and to leave things be."

"Oh?" said Cockie coldly. "Why would they have said that?"

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"Well, account of— I mean, nobody liked the old—I mean, nobody liked the Duke, sir, did they?"

"You, however, stifled your feelings and dashed off to his assistance?"

"Only me duty, sir," said Constable Fisher.

"How did you know he'd be here?"

"Well, I saw him arriving," the constable explained. "And he always did spend most of the day here, brought down his sangwidges and coffee and that."

"And seems to have consumed them. Does that strike you as rather odd?"

"What, like 'the prisoner ate a hearty breakfast?' "

The Inspector bent upon him an appreciative eye. "Exactly. Who eats up his lunch before he sets about killing himself?"

"If a gentleman had—well, like moods, sir. And it was a while ago: the coffee's gone quite cold."

"Yes, well . . . Now once again, Constable. You were at this door within six or seven minutes of your hearing the shot? The door was locked. You went round to the window and looked through. The window round at the side of the room, not to this one next to the door, which is nearest."

"You can't see the whole room from the little window, sir. Even from the other one, I couldn't see much. But I could see a good bit of him. I—well, I got a bit rattled, sir, seeing him lying there like that, sort of dead like."

"Very dead like," said Cockie sardonically. "You didn't think of going in and trying to resuscitate him?"

"But he was dead, sir. His head—" He puffed out his cheeks and put a hand over his mouth.

"You'll get used to it," said the Inspector, more kindly. "It shakes one, the first time. So you got on your bike and rode back to the gate? A bit wobbly, those tire marks, the returning ones."

"Yes, well, I was a bit—I didn't know what to do, sir, till the sergeant came."

"In other words, you lost your head."

To Sergeant Crum he said, grumbling: "A wretched young rookie! The Duke of Hawksmere, no less, announces his forthcoming suicide and who's on the spot? This great, green baby of a rookie constable, not yet dry behind the ears." He glanced up at the castle frowning down, formidable, upon them from the hilltop. "God knows what on earth the Duchess is going to say . . ."

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What the Duchess in fact said was, comfortably, "Oh, well, he was always threatening suicide, *was*n't he? His farewell notes simply litter the place. If the police had always had someone important at the ready, no other work would have got done at all." But that poor boy, she added, must have been scared stiff, all on his own, having to cope. "And you say it's not really quite so simple?"

Not simple at all. But for the moment he dodged it. He said, gratefully: "Your Grace takes it very calmly."

They sat in her private room with its charming pieces of period furniture, made cozy by large, comfortable armchairs. The Duchess had always seemed to him, in many ways, like a comfortable armchair herself: warm and well cushioned and to all the world holding out welcoming arms. "Well, yes—I can't pretend to be heartbroken, he was only a fairly remote cousin, you know, and such a misery, poor man!" Her son, the young Duke, had died in an accident up at his University three years ago and his cousin succeeded to the title.

"I stayed on here at the castle with him, though I longed to retire to the Dower House and be on my own. But he was a mean man, he cared nothing for the estate and the people—he was doing a lot of harm all over the place. Now his brother will succeed him and he's a very different kettle of fish. He loves it, and Rupert, his boy, and darling little Becca, they really do care about it, too. And what a change for them! Poor as church mice they all were till Cousin Hamnet inherited. Everyone thinks that if you belong to a great old family like ours, you must naturally be rich, but of course, apart from the title, that needn't be so at all. And they certainly weren't." It was on account of this, she believed, that Hamnet had never got married; though now, as a matter of fact, there were murmurs about his doing so.

"So Hamnet was pretty happy to succeed?"

"Well—not happy as we've seen. He was not a happy man. A depressive, I suppose the psychiatrists would say, and he certainly got no joy out of being Duke of Hawksmere. But there *is* a joy, you know, in being at the center of it all and caring about the land—running it properly, looking after the people, one's own people. It sounds condescending, referring to them as 'our people,' but they do become like one's own, so many have been for generations with the family. One gets very protective towards them, and I'm thankful to say that Will, the new Duke, and darling Rupert and Becca have the feeling very strongly. I must confess," said the Duchess, "that

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I've loved it all. Even the bazaar-opening I've secretly rather enjoyed."

"Nobody opens a bazaar like Your Grace," said Cockie handsomely.

"Well, a new Grace will be opening them now, and they're all so happy to be here—now forever. The children were here a lot in their school hols, inseparable friends with the family down at South Lodge. Poor Dave, a bad attack of calf-love, it was rather touching, all great hands and feet and blushing like a peony every time she came near him."

Inspector Cockrill, unfamiliar with any South Lodge family and ignorant of whoever Dave might be, preferred to probe a little further into the family of the new Duke. "They're all staying here at the moment, I understand?"

"Yes, for Christmas. I'm so happy having them here."

"A handsome pair, I believe. Tall, are they? Take after their father?"

"Oh, my dear, no—*ants!* I mean, compared with my own beautiful son, they seem so dark and little."

"Pretty lightweight, are they?"

"Both of them." She looked at him warily. "Why should you ask? You've got something up your sleeve, you old devil! You've been holding out on me."

"No, no," said the Inspector, "I just wanted to get the facts from you, unprejudiced. And so I have. And in return I'll offer Your Grace a fact, which I wouldn't do for most people, so please keep it absolutely to yourself." But he could hardly bring himself to speak it aloud. "Have you ever heard, Duchess, of a locked-room mystery?"

"You mean like detective stories? Doors bolted, windows barred, wastes of untrodden—" She broke off, incredulous. "You don't mean it? The lodge down there in the middle of all that snow?"

"The constable rode up to the front door on his bike. He walked a little way round to a side window and back. He rode back down to the gate. He and his sergeant then walked up to the house. *I* walked up to the house. Apart from those footsteps coming and going and the two lines coming and going of the bicycle tires there isn't a break in the whiteness all round about that place. Ringed round by the wall and the hedge, the lodge sitting like a cherry in the middle of an iced cake. Not a single sign."

"Oh, well," said the Duchess, "what's really so odd about that? Naturally, he'd have let the door close when he went into the

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lodge—the Duke, I mean. And in this weather he'd keep the windows shut. He went down before the snow began. Had this gun with him—presumably in case he came on suicidal at any time, which he was always doing; and he did come on suicidal. He rang up the police station as usual, sat down and composed yet another note, and this time, for a change, poor old Ham, he really did shoot himself. I mean, you say he was just lying there?"

"Almost right across the doorway," said Cockie. "Right hand flung out, fingers curled as though the gun had just fallen from them. The first thing you saw as you pushed open the door—his hand with his fingers half curled. Death instantaneous, shot at very close range, and no question of one of these medical freaks when a man moves about a bit, even walks a little distance after death. He died at once and lay where he had fallen."

"And in fact the constable even heard the shot. So where's the mystery?" said the Duchess reasonably. "Where's your locked room?"

"The locked room is the lodge," said Cockie, "locked in, as it were, in all that untrodden snow. A man dead in the lodge, very recently dead, death instantaneous, from a gunshot wound at very close range. And the mystery is very easy to state and not at all easy to answer. The mystery is, where is the gun—?"

"Where—?"

"—because it isn't lying there close to his right hand where it ought to be, and it isn't anywhere else in the lodge, and it isn't anywhere outside in all the snow." The cigarette held in his cupped hand sent its pale smoke spiraling up between his fingers, and he flung the butt suddenly, with an almost violent movement, into the heart of the flickering fire. "So damn the blasted thing," he said. "Where the hell *is* it?" And apologized immediately, "I beg Your Ladyship's pardon!"

"Oh, no, don't apologize," said the Duchess. "I do see. It's dreadful for you." Well, and dreadful for all of them, she added with growing recognition of what it must mean.

For if the Duke of Hawksmere hadn't shot himself at last, who had done it for him?

And how did that person get away?

And what did he do with the gun?

They sat for a long time in silence, thinking it over. The Chief Inspector said at last, reluctantly: "There seems to be only the one possible solution."

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"Mm," said the Duchess. She looked at him rather unhappily. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Just a question of what on earth could have been the motive," said the Inspector, shrugging.

"Motive? Oh!" She looked quite horrified. "You're not thinking what I'm thinking after all, Cockie." And what he *was* thinking was absolutely, absolutely, said the Duchess earnestly, "abso*lute*ly *wrong*."

The handful of men at the disposal of the police had been supplemented by carefully selected village helpers, and at South Lodge there was much pushing and thrusting and beating about hedges and ditches in search of the missing weapon. Result: exactly nil. By now, in the magical way that such things happen, the local press at least had got wind of the affair and their reporters had come swarming over in a fever of excitement from the neighboring small towns: doubtless Fleet Street would soon be upon them. Already they were creating a dangerous nuisance, slouching about in the inevitable filthy old mackintoshes, humped under the weight of swinging cameras, trampling all over the sacred ground.

"Couldn't do much about it," said the Inspector's own sergeant, Charlie Thomas, from Heronsford. "What with the search and all, there aren't enough men to keep them back. It's like a blob of mercury, you think you've got them all under your thumb and suddenly they're scattering into little blobs all over the place again. But, anyway, with fresh snow falling we couldn't do much more in the way of investigation, Chief. All the tracks are disappearing and we'd sorted out every last detail of what might have been a clue."

The Inspector stood for a long, long time looking outside at the ring of wall and hedge surrounding the flat expanse of white, tramped round through the churned-up snow to the window through which Constable Fisher had peered, trembling, for his first sight of the Duke's dead body. (Later the constable had been hoisted up by way of the same window frame to look over the many-spired parapet for any sign of the revolver. "No, Sarge," he had reported, "nothing up here!" From no other vantage point could it have been thrown there.)

And no gun anywhere else in the house. Not in the room where the Duke had died nor in the empty rooms out at the back. The connecting door had been locked and bolted from this side, all the windows and the back door had been similarly fastened—boarded

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up in most cases. It was as though someone, having made all safe from within, had come out into the octagonal room and locked the intervening door behind him. Nor was there any sign of anyone having been in the back of the house for many long months. Inspector Cockrill gave vent to a satisfied sigh. He liked things to be exact.

It was late evening when, having left in charge trusted henchmen of his own, he collected his sergeant and drove with him back to Heronsford. The night was dark but star-lit, all aglitter where the headlights picked out the leafless twigs of the hedges, frost-laden. He sat in the passenger seat, the cigarette smoke curling up through his nicotined fingers. "Well, then, Charlie—what do you make of it?"

"Not a lot," said the sergeant, eyes on the unrolling white ribbon of the road.

"Sealed room. No marks in the snow that aren't accounted for."

"Time of death?" prompted the sergeant.

"The doc says very recent. Works out at about the time young Fish says he heard the shot."

"Fisher," said Charlie.

"I don't know why I keep thinking it's Fish. Well—so?"

"Well, so there are questions to be asked," said the sergeant. "No acrobatic leaps possible, or trapeze acts or any of that stuff: the distances between the lodge and anything else are much too great. So number one would be, could anyone have been hiding in the lodge? Answer—we searched it thoroughly, even the roof outside, and positively there was not. Well, we were looking for the gun, but if a man had been there we'd hardly have missed him.

"Question two—and this one I know you're a bit fond of: why were the returning bicycle marks so wobbly? Answer—the wretched lad was scared out of his wits, having been first on the scene and found the Duke dead—his hands were probably shaking like jellies on the handlebars. Even Crum observed that he was pale and distressed. Question three, then: did he really hear the sound of the shot?—no one else did. Answer—sure enough, we have only his word for it. Question four then is: was it really the Duke who telephoned the station? And the answer to that is that Sergeant Crum, who took the message, is so thick he would never think to question it.

"Number five: why did Crum then bat off up to the castle when the constable was supposed to have heard the shot from his home, which he couldn't possibly have done if it had been fired up at the

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castle? That gets the same answer—the man is as thick as two planks. Question six: did the Duke really write the suicide note which was propped up on the desk? Answer—yes, probably, but it could have been written under coercion. Finally—and this is the sixty-million-dollar one—how did the murderer get away, taking the gun with him? Answer—"

"Or answers . . ."

"Pretty obvious, Mr. Cockrill, don't you think? Only one way, really. Different versions of the same, depending upon who the murderer *was*."

"Except in the case of the one I think of as number four."

"Four?" said the sergeant, almost as though they were playing a word-game. "I've only got three."

Inspector Cockrill ran over them, ascribing to each a motive or motives. "I've only just now decided to add in this fourth one. In that case, the motive could be anything: His Late Grace was a deeply unlovable man." They sat silent a little while, musing over it all, while the little car crept across the light carpet of snow—in this narrow, little-used byroad hardly disturbed at all. The sergeant said at last: "It's odd that with the first three the motive in each case seems to be vicarious—if by that I mean, on behalf of other people."

"Well, I'd hardly say that: other people would benefit, certainly. In the first, it would certainly seem so vicarious, as you call it, as to be very hard to believe." He added rather gloomily that they mustn't forget that the Duchess appeared to have a candidate of her own and one without even a motive. "And that makes five."

The sergeant was hardly impressed. "Oh, well, sir—the Duchess!"

The Inspector had sat all this time nursing the enormous hat on his bony knees. Now, as they reached his gate, he scrambled out, clapping it back onto his head. "Yes, well— 'the Duchess' you say, my lad. But the Dowager Duchess of Hawksmere, let me tell you, is an exceedingly shrewd old bird. And I'm a bit scared of her. There's nothing she'd stop at to protect 'our people,' let alone her own family." He slammed-to the door of the car and stood hunting through the pockets of the disreputable old mac in search of his keys. "Oh, thank goodness, here are the damn things. I'm in need of a hot drink and bed. Good night, Charlie. Go off home now and sleep well. Tomorrow is another day."

Another day. For all but the late Duke of Hawksmere, lying so quiet and stiff in his metal cold-box, split like a herring to reveal his body's secrets: with nothing to disclose, however, but the recent

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consumption of a sandwich meal, and a gunshot wound in the head . . .

The new day was less than gladdened for Inspector Cockrill by the arrival of the Chief Constable of the county. A choleric, ex-military man, he huffed and puffed a good deal, unable to face the grotesquerie of a locked-room mystery right there in their midst, and for comfort settled on the solid facts relating to the missing weapon. Well, yes, said Inspector Cockrill, a common enough type of weapon left over from the last war—impossible to say how many ex-officers might, for one reason or another, have failed to hand back their revolvers at the conclusion of hostilities. The passage through bone, explained the experts, would make it difficult to ascribe the bullet to any one particular gun.

"Was the late Duke known to have possessed such a revolver?"

"If you recall, Sir George, you yourself undertook to question him on the subject."

"Yes, well, so I did call on him and ask him. But delicately, you know, stepping very delicately. He hardly seemed to know what I was talking about. But he certainly didn't deny that he had such a weapon."

Very helpful, reflected Cockie.

"Well, you can't march in with a sniffer-dog and search a place like the castle," said the Chief Constable huffily. Besides, he added, these people who were always threatening suicide never really did it.

"Nosir," said Cockie in the authentic accents of Police Constable Fisher at his most wooden. He explained the probable difficulties in ascribing the bullet to the late Duke's, or indeed to any revolver.

"Which, anyway, you've lost," the Chief Constable reminded him sourly.

"Oh, yessir, so we have," said the Inspector, more in the Sergeant Crum line this time. Sort of thing that could happen to anyone, the voice suggested.

At first light, the search for the missing gun had begun again—village people, tremendously eager and helpful, said Cockie. Although, he added limpidly, none of them had liked the Duke, most of them having understandable grudges against him. To tenants so long accustomed to the cherishing rule of the Dukes of Hawksmere, with the family arms around "our people," he had seemed a mean, to them a dangerous man.

The Chief Constable was as appalled as the Inspector could have

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wished. "Good God, man, they'll all be on the side of the killer! You don't know *who* may have found the thing and be harboring it somewhere. They must be taken off at once—search them, search their homes, search every house in the village!"

He stumped off angrily to wreak further havoc from the comfortable ambiance of the Heronsford police station and Chief Inspector Cockrill was able to give out, with a lightened heart, that these arbitrary orders came not from himself—as if he would—but from the Chief Constable in his un-wisdom. He must, however, have considerably overrated his superior's enthusiasm—Sir George would never have contemplated an intrusion into the castle itself.

The search there was more easily concluded than might have been expected—by anyone but the Inspector himself. "Under some papers in a drawer of the late Duke's desk," he explained to the Dowager Duchess. "Surprise, surprise!" he added sardonically.

"*Not* a surprise." said the Duchess. "After all, it may not be the one that was used. I hear the bullet may not prove to be traceable. Perhaps he didn't have this one with him. He presumably didn't always lug one around with him."

"So how did he propose to shoot himself down at the lodge? He rang up the station and said he was about to do so."

"Well, someone rang up the station. Would Sergeant Crum necessarily have questioned the voice? And there'd be suicide notes all over the place. Whoever it was could just have used one of those."

"Your Grace ought to be in my job," said the Chief Inspector respectfully.

"Do you know, Cockie," said the Duchess on a note of not very sincere apology, "in this particular case, I really believe I should."

Mr. Cockrill felt in duty bound to report to his Chief Constable, though by no means to unravel matters clearly for him. "Her Grace put the gun there herself, of course, as I knew she would."

"The *Duchess?*"

"The Dowager. It was in a package sent up with her letters this morning. Well, of course, her post has been prodigious. Posted last night here in Hawksmere. Everyone's been in and out of the village, in and out of Heronsford, up and down to London like yoyos, lawyers and so forth: a Duke doesn't die like ordinary men, let alone get himself murdered. The post alone may tell us something," suggested Cockie. "Don't you think?"

It patently told the Chief Constable nothing whatsoever. He huffed

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and puffed and went off at a tangent. "Why should the Duchess do such a thing?"

"Protecting her family?"

"For heaven's sake—her family! You're not suspecting the new Duke of Hawksmere in a business like this?"

"He had everything to gain. But, well, no—"

"Well, then, young Rupert. You wouldn't—"

"His father has succeeded the sixth Duke. He is now heir to the title. And he loves the place and the people on the estate deeply. The family own half the county. He was horrified by the way the late Duke was treating them. And he was threatening to marry and get an heir for himself. We have to consider young Rupert."

"Good heavens, Cockrill, I shall never live this down!"

"Or there's the girl," continued Cockie remorselessly. "She felt the same about it all. And of course her parents now become Duke and Duchess instead of being just hard-up nobodies."

Sir George looked as though spontaneous combustion were just around the corner. The daughter of the Duke! Or the heir to the dukedom! But comfort was at hand. He demanded triumphantly, "Just explain to me how either of them could have got away from the building? The tire marks, the footmarks, are all accounted for, and there are no others. So how could either of those young people have got away from the place?"

Oh, well, as to that, said Cockie, tremendously offhand, one could think of three or four explanations in each case; surely Sir George must have worked them out for himself? And he suddenly caught sight of Charlie Thomas and must rush off and join his sergeant, if Sir George would excuse him . . .

To Charlie, he said: "I can't resist pulling the old buffer's leg."

"You'll get yourself into trouble one of these days, Boss," said the sergeant, laughing. But what on earth, he wondered, was going to happen next?

"What will happen next," said Cockie prophetically, "is that a letter will arrive, suggesting a new and totally unexpected suspect and a new and totally unexpected method of getting away from the lodge—snow surroundings, bike marks, footprints, and all."

And duly the letter arrived and was handed over to them by the Duchess herself. "In this morning's post. Addressed to me. The postmark? But, Cockie dear, you've no notion what the mails have been like—with the Duke's death, you know, all the business letters and

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the sympathetics, poor loves, so tricky for them to know just what to say! I mean, 'So sorry to hear that your cousin has been murdered. Whatever will you do about the funeral? Yours affectionately, Aunt Maude.' The children are reading through them in fits of giggles, they are so naughty! But as to the postmarks, I'm afraid we just slit all the envelopes open and threw them away. It's not like the Americans who put their addresses on the back—I never get used to it. But out they've gone, and with this sort of cheap writing paper there wouldn't be a matching envelope, we'd never trace which belonged to which."

Nor had the typewriter proved traceable to anyone in or around Hawksmere. Probably done in a pretense of testing a demonstration model somewhere up in London, Cockie thought. A very old trick. Style, predictably illiterate.

"Dear Dutchess," ran the letter, "I am well away now and soon will be abroard so to save truoble for others I confes to the murder of tghe duke of Hawksmear he was a relaiton of yuors but he was a dead rotter and he deseved to die. I went doun befor the sno began he let me in I told him he mite as well comit suiside but he siad he would not now as he was hopeing to het marrid he did not seam to have a gun but I had bruoght one along with me in case. I cuold not make him write a suiside note but there was one rihgt there on the desk just lying about.

"By now it was snoing and I pushed the gun in his back and mad him ring up the police station and say he was going to shoot hisself then I put tghe gun near his head and shot him. When I opend the door it was very quite I haerd a bycicle bell and I went back and closed the door when I hared the person go away I cam out and I saw footsteps in the snow going round the house and I followed them and there was a window. I climbed up by the window on to the roof and when the jurnalists cam crowding round I showed myself and a policeman came and hauled me down so I said I only wanted to get a shot of the snow with the footmarks, as if I was a jurnalist and they quit beleived me. I better say I saw a policeman was being hoisted up to see if tghe gun was on the roof, so I lay up against the parapet where he would be leaning over to look and unles he bent right over he wuld not see me and he did not he only calld out no gun here. That is all. There was a lot of peeple hated tghe duke long before he was a duke and I was one of them. Yuo need not look any feurther."

"Well, well, well," said Cockie, handing over this effusion to his

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sergeant. "What did I tell you?" He went on down to the lodge and summoned the constable. "Well, now, Fish—"

"Fisher, sir," said the constable a trifle desperately.

"All right, never mind that. You were the man sent up to see if the gun had been thrown onto the flat roof of this room. Why did you choose to climb up via the side window?"

"It couldn't have been thrown from any other point, sir. There's a porch over the front steps and there weren't any other marks in the snow."

"The gun could have slithered back and come to rest just under the parapet. You didn't think to hook yourself right over the edge and look downwards and inwards?"

"The gun wouldn't have done that, Mr. Cockrill, sir." He made a chucking movement with his hand. "It would slither away, sir, not backwards. But anyway, with the snow it would probably just stay where it fell. So it would be about in the middle of the roof. And it wasn't."

"So if a man were hiding close up under the parapet where you looked over—?"

"I could well have missed seeing him," Fisher admitted. "I wasn't looking there." And come to think of it, he suggested, a man *had* tried to climb up on the roof—two or three in fact—but each time been hauled back before he got there. "Them journalists, sir. If anyone got far enough, he would have seen if a gun had been thrown up there."

In fact, several of the culprits had been traced but none admitted having got up as far as the roof, and the consensus had been that this was true. Still, it might be well for Cockrill to scan the newspapers for press photographs of the snowy ground, taken from a high angle . . .

He came back to Constable Fisher. "The late Duke had a good many enemies? You yourself hardly loved him, I daresay?"

The constable's air of ease gave way to pallor and tensed-up fingers. "I never hardly set eyes on him, sir. Him being the Duke and all."

"Till the day before yesterday?"

"And by then he was dead, sir."

"Yes, so he was. It must have been a shock, peering in at that close-shut window? Now, tell me again—why that particular window?"

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"You can't see right into the room from the nearer one, sir. Not into the whole of the room."

"No you can't, can you? But how did you know that?"

"Well, sir, being as my gran and grandad used to live here—"

"They *lived* here?" said Cockrill, and glanced with a sort of gleam towards his sergeant. "They *lived* here? And were chucked out by the Duke, I suppose? And had to squash in with the rest of your big family, all in one little cottage—the old folks cranky and carping, I daresay, as old people are when they see too much of the young—your parents resentful and answering back, all those noisy brothers and sisters worse than ever, and everyone miserable. In other words—the Sardine Tin!"

"Except I think it must be more peaceful, sir, in a sardine tin."

No wonder, reflected the Inspector, that I kept thinking of him as Fish. "Never mind your constable's domestic arrangements," he had said, choking off Sergeant Crum's ill-timed explanations, and all that time . . . "All right for the moment, then, Fisher." But to Charlie he said: "Well, Sarge—the simplest explanation, after all? It was only that being more or less strangers to these parts we had no idea that such a motive existed. But now—"

A shot that nobody else had heard. Down to the lodge on one's bicycle and up to the front door. The Duke, placidly consuming sandwiches, is easily persuaded to admit the uniformed figure of the local rozzer. Some excuse—the police require the handing over of the revolver which His Grace is understood to have illegally in his possession. Gun in hand, force the telephone call to the police station. With any luck, Sergeant Crum will go batting off up to the castle, thus giving one more time. Force the production of the suicide note and then—one shot and it's done.

It's done: but all of a sudden, it's horrible. Back away to the open front door, gun in hand, having forgotten in one's panic to throw it down beside the outflung hand. Stand there, shaking, trying to wipe off one's fingerprints and—horror!—the door is blown shut by the whirl of the wind that is sending the snowflakes aflurry and one is locked out on the step with the gun in one's hand! Round to the window in hopes it may open sufficiently to throw the gun into the room. But it is tightly closed—and at any moment Sergeant Crum may arrive!

Down to the gate, then, awobble with nervousness, on one's bike and when the hue and cry goes forth, join eagerly in. For who will

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think of looking in the pocket of the heroic discoverer of the crime, for the weapon which brought it about?

Nervous? Yes, of course he would be nervous. But so what? A man is dead whom all the world detested, Gran and Grandad can come back to the cozy little home, Mum and Dad will be free and happy again, and the pack of younger brothers and sisters will be safe from the ceaseless censure of the older generation and settle down happily once more. Her Grace can move out to the dear little Dower House, the new Duke is a kind and generous man, Rupert, friend of one's childhood, will be heir to the dukedom, and long-loved Becca will be rich and happy and always down here at Hawksmere to be adored from afar. And how grateful, could they have known, would everyone for miles around have been to the begetter of all this happiness . . .

But first the gun. One cannot carry it around in a uniform pocket, and where to hide it in the narrow confines of the village to which one is now restricted? Post it off to the castle, then, with a message to the Duchess, "Please put this back where it belongs, for all our sakes." Her Grace must recognize that the thing has been done by someone here on the ducal estates, by one of "our people." Her Grace won't make trouble for anyone who will throw themselves upon her mercy, and Her Grace knows very well how to protect herself . . .

Charlie Thomas had been mulling it over, muttering at intervals into the recital, "Mm, mm." Now he said: "And the letter?"

"Ah," said Cockie, for the first time losing confidence a little. "The letter."

"Very interesting, that letter. Not in fact the work of an illiterate. The mistakes are deliberate. A writer who spells 'brought' as 'bruoght' knows what letters there are in that difficult word. A true illiterate would write 'brort' or something. And this isn't an accomplished typist. It's easy to hit a *g* when you intended an *h* and he keeps putting *tghe*. But Fisher types very well and I don't think he's bright enough to have thought all this up. So that would bring us to—"

"The new heir," said Cockie none too happily. "Young Rupert."

"It's one thing for a lad to want to help his grandparents to get back their old home," said Charlie. "But Rupert's dad becomes a Duke, they're all in the money, and, what's probably the most important point, 'our people' will be safe from the tyrant, who was threatening to marry and spawn a breed of mini-tyrants forever."

"So how do you suggest he got away, leaving no trace in the snow? You don't suggest that Rupert was the man on the roof?"

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"There never was any man on the roof, sir, *was* there? Just some damn journalist, trying to be cleverer than the rest; and *he* was hauled down and whoever he may have been, he wasn't Rupert. But we've both thought of ways in which someone other than Fisher could have got away from the lodge . . ."

There was the sound of hooves chiff-chuffing across the grass and a light voice exhorted: "Now, darlings, be good horses and just stay there!" and, with a thump at the door, the two young people came into the room.

"Look here, Inspector, you're *not* accusing poor Dave of murdering Cousin Ham?" demanded Lady Rebecca on a note of scorn.

An ant she might be, but a very pretty ant, the cloud of dark, soft hair crowned by a shabby little riding bowler. The brother was as dark and scarcely taller, very slender, and no less shabbily fitted out. Poor as church mice, the Duchess had said, and clearly their late cousin had not been generous with handouts, despite his sudden acquisition of title and great wealth. Inspector Cockrill said mildly: "Are you referring to Police Constable Fisher?"

"Yes—we've just met him in the lane, and he's petrified."

"If he did kill the Duke, that would be fairly natural."

"He no more killed the Duke than I did!" Rupert said.

"In fact, my boy, we were just discussing that very possibility. That you *did*."

"*Me?* What a lot of rubbish! Why on earth should I want to kill rotten old Cousin Hamnet?"

"Just because he *was* rotten old Cousin Hamnet."

The brother and sister were leaning back negligently against the edge of the table, feet crossed in their well worn riding boots. "Good lord," said Rebecca, "you're not going to suggest that he was the man on the roof, beloved of our Aunt Daisy—the Duchess Daisy," she elaborated. "And if you are, how did he get away from the lodge without leaving great humping footprints in the snow?"

"Well," said the Inspector easily, "we had an idea that he might have used a bicycle."

"Oh, that's great!" said Rupert. "I haven't even got a bicycle."

"But your dear friend Dave—he had a bicycle."

It rocked them a little, but the boy said nonchalantly enough, "Don't tell me—let me guess. I borrowed Dave's bicycle."

"At gun-point," suggested Becca, mocking, her pretty little nose in the air.

"Or by cajolement. He would be very much on your side."

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"You seem to have a simple faith in the trustworthiness of your force," said Rupert.

"Well, but—to such a good friend. And it does all seem to fit."

"It doesn't fit at all," said Rebecca. "We were together the whole afternoon, out riding." She saw as she spoke the weakness of this double alibi and added, "My Aunt Daisy saw us from the window. She'll tell you so."

"I'm sure she will," said the Inspector drily.

Rebecca slid down from her perch on the table edge. "So we'll be going home now because I can assure you that Dave didn't do it and neither did Rupert, so just *don't* be silly about it."

"No, indeed, since you put up so convincing a case. On the other hand," suggested Cockie, "you leave yourself undefended."

"*Me?*" said Becca as her brother had said before her.

"You had exactly the same possible motives as your brother. One or the other of you came down here before the snow fell—"

"Why one or the other—why not both of us?"

"Because only one person could have ridden away on that bicycle, with or without Constable Fisher." The sergeant opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Cockrill quelled him. "You came down here before the snow fell, one or the other of you. You started a long argument with your cousin about the running of the estate—about his possible marriage, perhaps. But it was all no good. You lost your temper, the gun was lying around as usual, ready for use if the fancy took him—and you picked it up. By that time the snow had fallen, but while you stood panicking on the doorstep, there appeared the gallant Saint Dave to the rescue on his trusty bicycle. No need in your case, Lady Rebecca, for any gun-pointing or even cajolement: up you scramble and, wobbling a bit with the extra weight and general insecurity, you duly arrive at the gate. Off you scarper and the friend of your childhood is left, rather scared, but glowing with the knowledge that he has saved—well, I'll still say one or other of those he loves."

"Not bad," said Rupert with a determined air of superiority, but looking, all the same, a little pale. "But surely there must be other candidates, not just Becca and me?"

"There aren't, you know. Your father is too big and heavy to have shared a bike with Fisher, who's a big chap too—I've tried an experiment and the bicycle broke down—and what's more, he has an alibi rather more convincing than that of a brother and sister out riding, watched by Her Grace, your cousin Daisy. Someone from

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round about? Well, the police aren't entirely idiots, you know, whatever you may believe to the contrary, and we've made very thorough investigations—you can count them all out."

"So you seriously think you have a case against us—against one of us?"

"Or Constable Fisher," said Cockie placidly.

Rupert slid down and stood beside his sister. "Well, we'll be going now, if you'll excuse us. You can bring the handcuffs up to the castle any time. Come on," he said to his sister. "We'll go and lay this mouse at the feet of our ever present help in times of trouble and see what *she* has to say to Mr. Cockrill about it."

The Inspector waited until the shuffle of hooves had trotted off into silence. Then he stretched himself. "Well, Charlie, at least we've got that off our chests." And perhaps another time, he added laughing, his sergeant would refrain from breaking out into expostulation when his superior officer dropped a clanger.

"It was you saying that only one person could have ridden away on the bike—with or without Fisher. Of course, anyone who had ridden the bike up to the lodge could just have ridden it back again—and any bike, for that matter, it needn't be Fisher's. The tire marks were snowed over before we really got at them."

"Well, it doesn't matter either way. The tracks were made by the constable: he'd seen into the room, he described it to Sergeant Crum. The tire marks were made by him, riding his own bike—quite possibly giving a lift back to the gate to someone of a fairly small physique. And we've eliminated everyone except that precious pair." He heaved himself up and shrugged on his dreadful old mac, thrust that hat onto his head, and gave it a thump which brought it down over his eyes. "Damn the thing, it never used to be as big as this," he said, irritably shoving it up to his forehead. "I'll get on up to the castle now and, in my turn, place my poor mouse at the feet of Her Ladyship. Who, however, is their cousin and not their aunt."

"Does it matter?" said Charlie, surprised.

"Not a bit," said the Inspector and folded himself, mac and hat and all, into his little police car. "See you, Sarge!"

"In one piece, I hope," said Charlie rather doubtfully.

The Duchess of Hawksmere met him in the vast hall, where she stood surrounded by his trio of suspects. "Oh, Cockie—how nice to see you! Now you, my loves," she said to the young ones—apparently without affectation on either side, including among her loves the

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village constable—"go off and get some coffee and buns or something and don't make any more fuss." One freckled hand on the bannisters, she began to haul herself up the stairs. "Sorry to be so slow, Inspector, but my arthritis is giving me hell today." At the door of her sitting room, she ushered him in. "Find a chair for yourself, but first pour me a drop of vodka, like an angel, and help yourself to whatever you like. And no nonsense about being on duty and all that—we're both going to need it, I promise you."

The Chief Inspector thought that upon his side, at any rate, this would certainly prove only too true. He cast the mac and hat upon a chair and sat down with her before the agreeably flickering fire. "Well, Duchess?"

"Well, Cockie! I thought you'd come up after the kids, with all their dramas, and here you are, and we can settle down and have a real good yat."

Only the Duchess of Hawksmere, reflected the Inspector, would refer to a serious discussion of a murder in the family as a good old yat. "I have to walk circumspectly, my lady."

"Oh, not with me. I mean nobody ever does: it's because I'm so dreadfully uncircumspect myself. So I thought," she suggested with her own particular brand of authority and humility, "would it be possible for you to outline for me the cases you have against all these young people? Because I really do think I can help you, you know."

He thought it over. It was all highly unconventional, but he, no more than Her Grace, had never been, would never be, a slave to that sort of thing. Moreover, he was curious about her own so-far-undisclosed candidate. "If it honestly will go no further?"

"Cross my heart and wish to die," said the Duchess, making a sign upon her well upholstered bosom.

"Well, then . . ." Somewhat gingerly and with many ifs and ands, he outlined one by one his suspicions of the young heir, Rupert, and his sister, the Lady Rebecca. "And then as to Fish—"

"Fisher," said the Duchess. "I do think it's so hurtful to get people's names wrong. I do it all the time myself, but I'm old so it doesn't count. Besides, I call everyone darling, such an actressy habit, I simply hate it: but at least they don't realize that half the time it's because I can't think who on earth they are!"

"Duchess, you are trying to charm me," said Cockie severely.

"Am I? Well, perhaps I am—I never know I'm doing it. But we

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ieed a little gaiety in all this awfulness, don't we? So, well then, hat brings us to the man on the roof—the letter."

Chief Inspector Cockrill expatiated at length upon the letter. Don't et's be silly about that, was the unexpressed burden of his reflec- ions. Aloud he said: "We know that that was just a diversion."

"But a very potent diversion, Chief Inspector, wouldn't you say? I mean—hardly to be denied outright, at least with any certainty. No possible proof for or against, is there?" She fixed him with a quizzical look which told him that he might as well be a bazaar that Her Grace was about to open. He knew he was at her mercy—and would love every minute of it. "But first, Cockie dear—another drink?"

"Not another drop, Duchess, thank you."

"Oh, but you must, or *I* can't. And you know that I can't get weaving till I'm in vodka up to the ankles. I get so tired," said the Duchess, looking as wan as every evidence of robust health would allow, "and when I'm tired, my mind simply won't work—I'm helpless."

It seemed to Inspector Cockrill highly desirable from his own point of view that Her Grace should remain without reviving vodka, but she had him in thrall. He reluctantly poured out two small rations ("Oh, Cockie, for goodness sake!") and more generously topped them up. "So now, my dear, what are we to do? Because you know perfectly well that my two young ones couldn't possibly have killed the man, and neither could poor, dear Dave. So we come back to the letter. And who wrote the letter."

"You wrote the letter yourself, Duchess, and posted it on one of your necessary expeditions up to London. Or didn't post it at all—just 'found it' among your letters."

"Well, what a thing to suggest! But really very perspicacious of you, Cockie. Yes, of course. I thought it might come in nicely for covering every eventuality: because if you could just settle for that—only keeping it to yourself, of course—and never be able to find a trace of the murderer, well, who could say a word against you?"

"My Chief Constable, for one, could say a word against me and would, most vociferously."

"Oh, that pompous old fool! Nobody will listen to a word he says; you just leave him to me. All you need do is cast about like mad, dragging in Scotland Yard and Interpol and all that lot, trying to trace the letter, trying to ferret out all Hamnet's old enemies, which

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after all would take you back twenty or thirty years—and finally give up and say the case is closed or whatever the expression is."

"No case is ever closed," said Cockie severely.

"Well, keep it a bit open, but just never solve it. Because what the letter says is true. Millions of people simply hated poor old Ham, long before he was ever a Duke. He was a misery to himself, always saying he wanted to die, never having the courage to get around to doing it. And now the lovely man on the roof has done it for him and everyone will simply love him for it and never want him to be caught at all."

"Except me," said the Chief Inspector somberly.

"Well, I do call that rather lacking in appreciation of my efforts to help you!"

"You don't suppose that *I'd* be content with some cooked-up nonsense, no one ever knowing the truth?"

"Well, but someone does know the truth, don't they, Cockie? I mean, I've told you all along, haven't I? *I* do."

"Your Grace has never had the goodness to divulge it to *me*."

"Oh, Cockie, how cross and sarcastic! Well, I'll divulge it now. But only," said the Duchess, downing the last of her second vodka tonic, "if you promise, promise, promise never to do anything about it."

"Are you asking me to let a criminal go free?"

"No, I'm not. I don't think there is any criminal—except the man on the roof. I think Hamnet did at last really go ahead and commit suicide. Ate his lunch, thought things over—he was always a bit dyspeptic after meals—and reached for the gun. And then—" She put out her pudgy hand with its carefully tended, varnished nails and touched his own nicotined fingers. "Trust me. You'll be grateful to me, honestly you will. I'm not practicing any deceit upon you—and it will solve everything."

You are old, he thought, and stout and arthritic and nowadays no beauty, but damn you— "All right," he said grudgingly. "So?"

"So—that boy, Cockie. You kept on saying it yourself—to be first on the scene of the bloody death of the Earl of Hawksmere, no less—a baby, a great, raw green rookie of a baby policeman, not yet dry behind the ears. In a total panic—wouldn't he be? What he said was the truth, my dear—he heard the shot, leapt on his bike, and pedaled like a lunatic down to the lodge and up through the snow to the front door. And the door was open. Hamnet always left an escape route—rang up in advance so that if ever he did take the plunge, someone could get there in time to haul him back to life. The door

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was open—how would anyone have heard the shot if it had been fired from behind sealed-up windows and doors? He looked inside and the first thing he saw was the Duke's head, dreadfully wounded, and the revolver lying there, fallen from the dead hand. So—what would any of us do? He panicked and, in an automatic impulse bent down and picked up the gun."

"Oh, my God!" said the Inspector.

"Yes, it was a bit Oh-my-God, wasn't it, since the number-one lesson a policeman is taught is never ever to touch anything at the scene of the crime. He would have thrown it down at once, I daresay, but another lesson came into his mind as he began to calm down—watch out for fingerprints! He got out his hankie or whatever and started wiping his own off the gun and—horror of horrors—there comes a flurry of wind and the door blows shut!"

"Leaving him locked out, with the gun still in his hands. Nips round to the side window to see if he can throw it back in, but the window's tight shut. So he shoves the thing into his pocket and, very nervous, wobbles back to the gate, and when Sergeant Crum arrives—not the most observant of men—goes into his act. The door was closed, he could only see the body by looking in through the window . . ."

"Yes. Well, there you are, Cockie—and there *he* was, poor wretched boy, and just think of his state of mind. Marching about all evening searching for the weapon when all the time it was in his uniform pocket. And now, for days, he'll be kept on duty in the village—and where in little Hawksmere can such a thing remain hidden for any length of time, with everyone searching for it? So what does he do? He posts it off to me. Of course, he can't be sure I've guessed the truth, but people have got into a sort of habit of thinking I'll cope. And that's all, really, except for the lovely, convenient man on the roof, made up for you by me."

He sat almost paralyzed in the deep armchair, looking at her smiling face. "Constable Fisher lost his head and just picked up the gun. Is this what you really believe?"

"It's the simple truth, my dear. And simple is the word."

"He's admitted it?"

"I haven't asked him. It was so obvious."

Not to the assembled forces of the law, it hadn't been. "But to prefer to be suspected of murder—?"

"He could always tell the truth in the end."

"Why not have told it from the beginning?"

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"My *dear,*" said the Duchess, "you'd have had his guts for garters."

He leapt to his feet. "One thing's for certain—I'll have them now."

"Yes, well—the only thing is, if this story gets out you'll look a bit of a fool, old love, won't you?"

Chief Inspector Cockrill, the Terror of Kent—a bit of a fool, right here on his own patch. "Hey, now, Duchess, if you *don't* mind—"

"Oh, but I do mind," she said. "I don't like to think of you looking foolish." And she pleaded, "Let the boy go! He's been through a bad time, you can be pretty sure of that; he won't do it again. There's nothing against Rupert and Becca, there's been no crime! This is what actually happened and that's the end of it. But the man on the roof—there he is, all worked out so nicely for you and it all hangs together perfectly, now doesn't it? Someone out of the past caught up with the wicked Duke and you never had a hope in hell of catching up with the someone from the past. Gradually the whole affair will fade and Chief Inspector Cockrill, for a miracle, has failed to Get his Man; but for the rest, everyone is happy." And one couldn't help thinking, said the Duchess, confiding to the fireplace, that it is less humiliating to fail to solve a very difficult case than to have failed to solve such a very simple one as a young officer losing his head.

"No one must ever know," said the Inspector; and it was capitulation.

"Good heavens, no. I'll talk to Dave Fisher and tell him what I've guessed and that to save his skin I've played a naughty game all round, and just to pipe down and never get it into his head to confess because he'd get me into trouble. I could even suggest that you rather suspect that this might have happened, but you have to investigate every possibility."

"Except the right one," said Chief Inspector Cockrill rather stiffly. He collected his droopy mackintosh from the back of the chair, clapped the hat on his head, and hastily removed it, in the presence of Her Ladyship. "And honestly—not one word of this to anyone?"

"Oh, not a word," vowed the Duchess, even now casting about in her mind for someone one could safely confide in. For really it had been rather a bit of fun. "But I *told* you."

"You told me—?"

"That in this case, I really should have been in your job," said the Duchess. She too rose. "I say, Inspector—what about one more little one? I really think we could do with it. Do join me!"

Inspector Cockrill paused a moment and then cast down his hat and coat again. "Do you know, Duchess—I think I will," he said.

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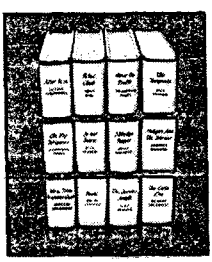

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DETECTIVERSE

A HOLE IN TWO

by ROY COX

A horrified sheriff out west
Found a man with a hole in his vest.
But, Lord bless my soul
If the dang-blasted hole
Didn't extend from his vest through his chest.

© *1984 by Roy Cox.*

"Q"

WITH DRAWL

by RICHARD E. CROMPTON

The inspector quickly viewed the gore
And the lanky body on the floor.
A bruise he spied behind one ear,
Caused by a shattered jug of beer.
'Neath the chest a guitar was smashed
When to the floor the body crashed.
Cowboy boots encased the feet
And a small red tab graced the denim seat.
The inspector knew in the nick of time
That this was a Country and Western crime—
But he wondered then, both hard and long,
If the cowboy ended before the song.

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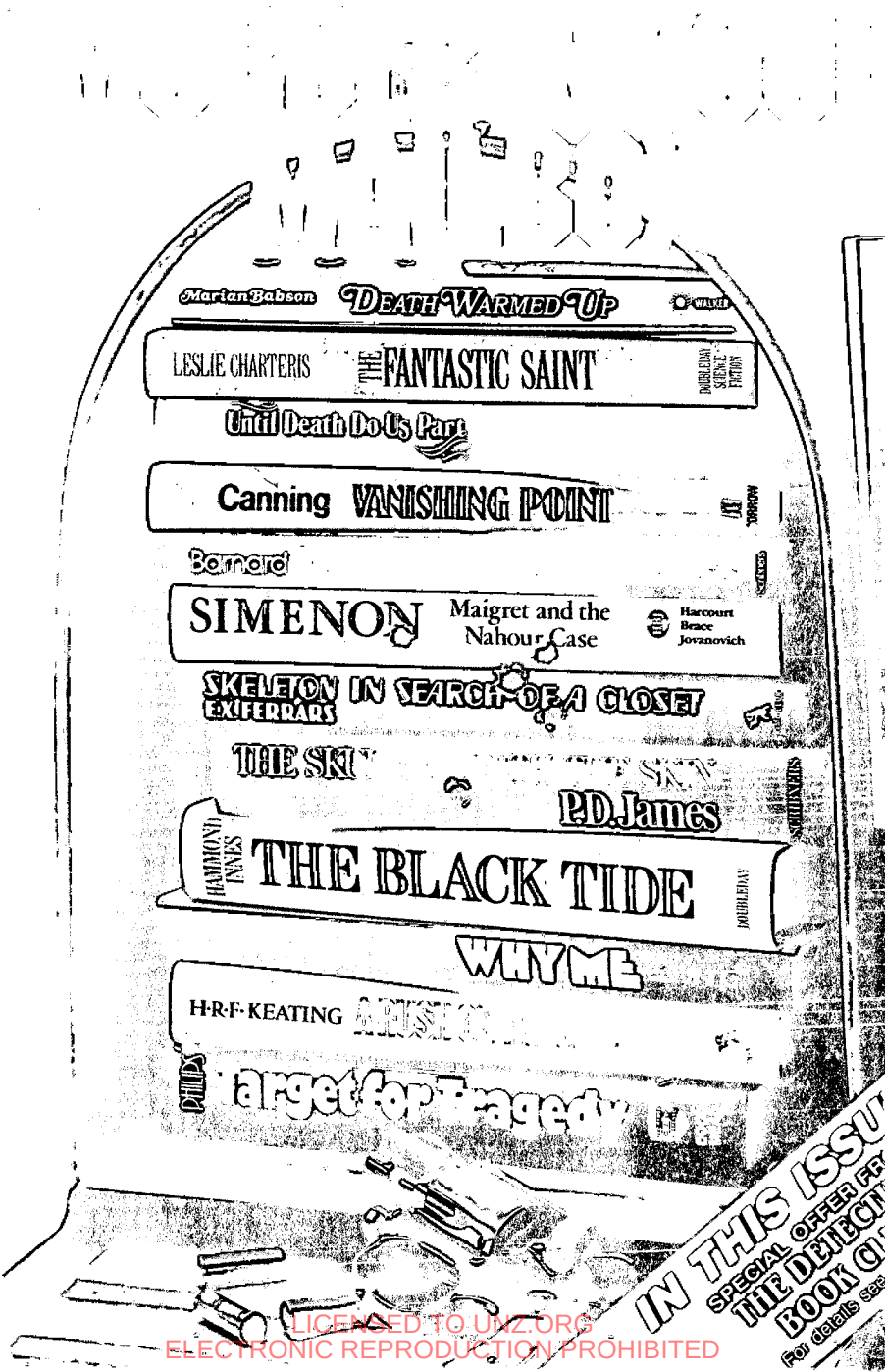

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